WICKED LEEKS

ISSUE 6 | SPRING 2021

SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND ETHICAL BUSINESS

Climate-friendly eating

Food writer Anna Jones on reducing the impact of your diet.

Spotlight on ingredients

Tracing the stories behind your spices, herbs and sauces.

Plus

How to eat seasonal in spring

Bats and biodiversity

Special report on Scotland and regional food

Small but mighty

Jyoti Fernandes takes us inside the local food revolution and why small-scale producers are standing up for their rights.

WICKEDLEEKS.COM

Published by Riverford Organic Farmers

Welcome

WICKED LEEKS

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There's a thread of small food producers running through this issue. Whether it's those struggling to survive a hard Brexit and trading regime that only big multinationals can shoulder (page 3), or those, as described by cover star Jyoti Fernandes, who are working the land "to fight against the system...because they don't want to contribute to the climate or biodiversity crises" (pages 10-13).

Fernandes paints a radically different picture of small farmers from those you might recognise from the mainstream press, which has charted the rise in farmgate veg boxes and 'local food' since the pandemic without going anywhere near the challenges these farmers face. Competing against subsidised, industrially produced food, small producers often work long hours for little return. But their contribution to biodiversity is hugely underrated (see pages 22-23 for an unusual link between organic cowpats and bats), and their ability to adapt means they're likely to be more climate resilient (pages 20-21).

This last is another theme of this issue as we grapple with how to reduce our own footprints: how to eat a climate-friendly diet? Food writer Anna Jones tackles this eloquently in her column on page 6, while in Lifestyle we explore what it means to eat seasonally in spring (pages 26-29), and how that can help anchor you to time and place. It's maybe also why food is such a good springboard from which to explore our impact and place within the natural world and society.

We hope you find both the joy and the inspiration for change within this issue – if you like what you read, there is more at www.wickedleeks.com/#join.

Nina Pullman
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Hard Brexit brings chaos to small business

The shellfish industry is preparing to sue the government over Brexit.

By Nina Pullman

Brexit has left small businesses reeling as new trade rules mean exports to Europe have ceased in some sectors, while others face thousands in new weekly paperwork costs.

It comes amid growing long-term fears that small sustainable businesses are unable to shoulder the burden of the new trading regime, leaving the UK market open to dominance by global brands.

Offshore Shellfish, in Devon, which produces organically certified mussels primarily for export, has had no income since the start of the year, after it says Defra failed to understand a technicality which rules that no third country can export live shellfish raised in Grade B waters to the EU.

Despite assurances that this would be covered in a deal, it has transpired not to be the case and the company is now unable to export. It sends 95 per cent of its shellfish to the continent, where demand far outweighs Britain's, and along with other farms, is preparing to sue the government for compensation for loss of income.

"The stress is enormous, and we remain unsure of the outcome, but we are prepared to take the UK government to court for mishandling the shellfish issue during Brexit negotiations, and for misleading us for the past two years," said managing director, John Holmyard.

Owner of sustainable fish supplier Sole of Discretion, Caroline Bennett, has faced failed or delayed shipments since 1 January, and "any hope of profit lost". "The crux of the problem arises from being small-scale," she said. "The volumes we export are insufficient to commission a full container, instead relying on a haulage company to amalgamate orders. If there is a single mistake on any of the documents submitted by the various companies, the entire shipment is rejected. The reality is that this new trading regime is likely to kill off many small-scale food producers' ability to import and export with the EU, leaving consumers in the UK with access to only the large global brands."

Both Holmroyd, who has been in the shellfish industry for 33 years, and Bennett, who exports 25 per cent of her British-caught fish to Belgium, stressed that it is not possible to simply divert produce to the British market.

The issue of sustainable seafood has risen up the agenda thanks to the recent *Seaspiracy* film on Netflix, but Holmroyd said: "Consumers in northern France and Belgium have always been much greater consumers of mussels than anyone else.

"We're very happy to sell stuff in this country. We'd love people to eat ten times as much, because it's good for you and does the environment lots of good things. People don't want to buy them in this country and I can't make them."

Importing from small organic growers on the continent, veg box company Riverford is now incurring around £5,500 in weekly costs from additional paperwork. "There's the financial burden, but it's the addition of new processes, the unknown, lack of support and ultimately the stress of it all," said Riverford's head of procurement, Dale Robinson, who said he's "surprised" prices haven't gone up in supermarkets yet.

> Unless they change something, we're going out of business.

"Resourcing to complete what they require simply isn't there. When I tried to register us so we can receive some products, I was told by an officer in Defra 'don't hold your breath, I've got hundreds of these to register and don't have the time'."

Founder of Riverford, Guy Singh-Watson, said the situation raises concerns about the types of business relationships that will prosper in the future. "Too often business, in the UK and the US, is perceived as making short-term deals rather than building sustainable, trusting, long-term relationships," he said.

"Trade flourishes on uncertainty and the volatile markets that come with it; most of the businesses that deliver innovation, sustainable wealth (and environmental solutions in particular) are crippled by it."

Holmyard, whose business employs 16 people, said Defra insists it is the EU that has changed the rules. "We knew damn well that mussels from Grade B waters could not be exported into Europe by third country," he said. "The simple story is it's a misunderstanding or carelessness on Defra's part that has led us into this position. Unless they change something, we're going out of business."

Agribusiness and low demand blocking bean revolution

Beans help reduce reliance on fertilisers and animal protein.

By Jack Thompson

Limited profits for agribusiness, low demand from consumers and low prices are hampering growth in beans despite being touted as one of the most climate-friendly crops.

It comes as new research published recently detailed the myriad benefits of legume production and consumption for human, soil, and planetary health.

The report by Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems gained national coverage in the *Guardian* and the *i* newspaper, extolling the virtues of pulses and the key role they could play in healthy and sustainable diet transitions.

Growing beans 'fixes' nitrogen in the soil, meaning farmers need less synthetic fertiliser, which is a major contributor to emissions from farming. In addition, plant proteins in legumes and pulses can replace animal proteins in diets, helping cut reliance on industrial meat farming.

Report author Marcela Porto Costa said: "We've shown that the introduction of a legume crop into the typical rotation reduced external nitrogen requirements by almost half whilst maintaining the same output of food measured in terms of potential human nutrition."

But despite being a 'win-win' for farmers, consumers, and the planet, beans occupy just 1.5 per cent of Europe's current cropping area, according to the paper.

Farmers, researchers, and industry experts told Wicked Leeks that far from simply being able to scale up, there is a complex network of factors blocking bean production in the UK, including close ties to the agribusiness sector that mean farmers often grow what is commercially useful to those companies.

"It's not a crop that needs a lot of inputs [pesticides or fertilisers] so big agribusiness companies don't see a great return," said Northamptonshire arable farmer Keith Thompson, who grows beans as part of his rotation. "Beans and pulse breeding have been underfunded compared to oilseed rape and cereals."

According to Thompson, the lack of research means that growing legumes is riskier, with smaller profit margins for farmers. It becomes a trade-off against better-funded crops such as wheat and oilseed rape, he said, as farmers are likely to earn less money by growing beans, even if it might be good for their soil.

Most British beans and peas are grown for animal feed because it's a protein-rich crop and difficult to grow to a standard for human consumption. However, the market for animal feed is volatile and subject to an ultra-competitive globalised commodity network of supply and demand.

Stephen Belsher, technical officer at PGRO, the UK's centre of excellence for beans and peas, said: "It's a double-edged sword for farmers. If the prices rise too much, animal feed companies will just switch their formulations to imported soybeans instead."

Co-founder of pulse pioneer Hodmedod, Josiah Meldrum, explained: "As it stands, almost all pulses are traded as commodities and, though some grow well here, we don't have the economies of scale that Australia, Canada, and the US have and it's hard for our farmers to compete in global markets.

"The UK is a very low per-capita consumer of pulses, and those we do eat tend to be varieties that don't grow here particularly well – haricot, lentils, chickpeas," said Meldrum, who said low demand could be down to poor consumer perception. "Those that do grow well here, peas and fava beans, are still suffering the hangover of the UK getting rich a few hundred years ago when traditionally eaten pulses were stigmatised," he added.

NEWS BY NUMBERS

British moths have declined by a third in the last 50 years, driven by habitat loss, chemicals, light pollution and climate change.

The percentage of people who say they have 'any awareness' of what net zero means, according to a recent government study.

5 hectares

Farms below 5 ha are excluded from the government's new subsidy system, despite benefiting biodiversity, local communities and food security.

Most read on wickedleeks.com:

1. Diary of a bin diver
2. Top five Hungry Gap recipes
3. Roots to fruits: The joy of beans
4. Brexit threatens organic seed supply

Power to the people: community energy in the spotlight

Community-owned renewable energy is an alternative to multinational monopolies that could bring financial benefits and power to local economies and speed up a clean transition.

That is the message behind the new campaign from outdoor adventure brand Patagonia, We the Power, which wants to galvanize citizens to switch to a community-owned energy provider or start their own, and support legislative change.

The campaign has launched alongside a documentary of the same name, featuring community energy pioneers from across Europe. It aims to show how community-owned energy generation (usually a small business owned by the community) builds a network of clean energy and local investment, but also engagement, civic empowerment and a wide range of social benefits.

"Imagine a future where you can purchase clean electricity directly from a local supply company or co-operative. Where every pound spent powering your home or car supports local jobs and helps fund new facilities and services for your community," said Steve Shaw, director of the non profit Power for People, which campaigns for the Local Electricity Bill to allow communities to produce and buy their own energy.

The UK differs to mainland Europe with restrictions on generating and selling energy to a local community. In Europe, there are already one million people involved in community energy, with the sector expected to be able to supply 45 per cent of Europe's energy by 2050.

Generating renewable energy can benefit local economies.

Public wakes up to crisis in fishing

People are questioning their intake of fish after the recent Netlix film, *Seaspiracy*, where footage showed the devastating impact of large-scale industrial fishing.

A poll run by Wicked Leeks on Twitter found 46 per cent of respondents said they would no longer eat fish, while 32 per cent said they would eat fish but "much less". *Seaspiracy* has gained widespread attention since airing in March, including criticism of incorrect statistics, misleading quotes and a simplistic conclusion.

Managing director of sustainable fish supplier, Fish for Thought, Paul Trudgian, said: "At the heart of the programme it was about highlighting some illegal and appalling things that are going on. You can't argue with the broad statement and the fact these things do happen. The answer is not to stop eating fish, it's to stop eating the wrong fish."

Certifications including MSC's blue tick and Dolphin Safe came under attack in *Seaspiracy* for allowing damaging methods of fishing, while consumers believe they are buying sustainably caught fish.

A spokesperson for MSC said: "While we disagree with much of what the *Seaspiracy* documentary-makers say, one thing we do agree with is that there is a crisis of overfishing in our oceans."

Trudgian said that while *Seaspiracy* has meant the debate on fishing has taken off, the subsequent fallout has diluted its impact. "The result is people talk about the misinterpretation of facts rather than some of the really serious issues," he said. "Broadly speaking we're glad the debate is taking place. Fishing done on that scale is devastating."

STAR LETTER

Interesting reactions to films like this. People want to defend their position, pointing to the people who live in coastal areas and rely on fishing for their protein. But isn't that the point? The rich west send their trawlers with huge nets to hoover up all the fish and stop local small scale fishing boats from meeting their own needs. *Antony Roper.*

Tweeted

@AnnaTurns 16 Apr

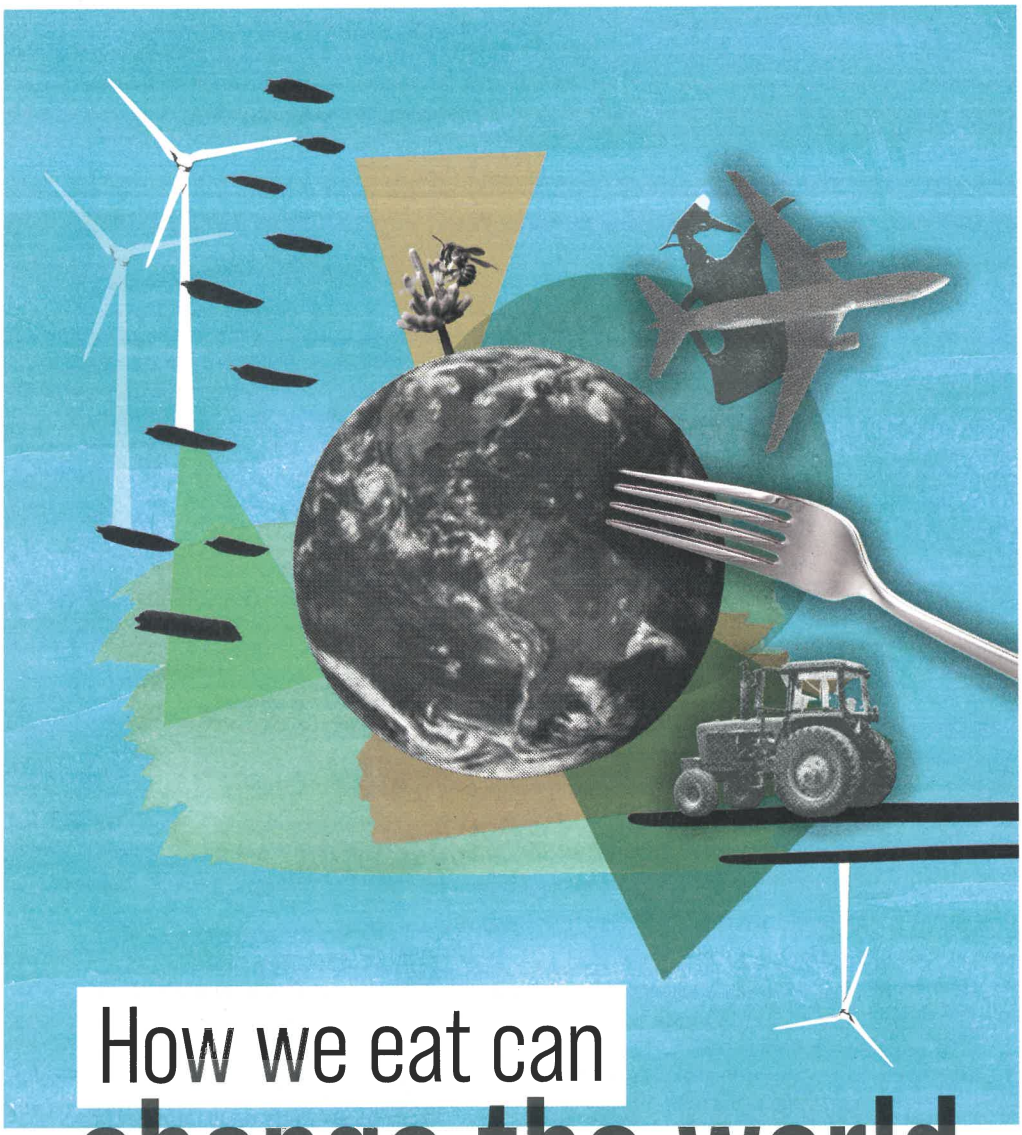
Just watching #WeThePower by @Patagonia ... community-owned energy is a hot topic. Worth a watch.

@lucysiegle 16 Apr

One in eight households in Great Britain had zero access to a private or shared garden during the pandemic. Just a quarter of people in Great Britain live within a five-minute walk of a public park. We need to do better on this.

@MonaBani 14 Apr

For the latest @Untelevised_tv podcast I spoke with the founder of @Riverford Guy Singh Watson & @nina_pullman the editor @wickedleeksmag about how democracy looks in the workplace, through their employee owned business. Listen at linktr.ee/untelevised.



How we eat can change the world

ANNA JONES
Author of *One Pot, Pan, Planet*
@we_are_food

We are at a turning point, a moment of crisis and of great opportunity. The events of the last 12 months have proven that collective action can lead to radical change, both in ideology and behaviour, and I hope that we can move forwards armed with the knowledge that a different world is really possible. To be part of the urgent shifts that need to happen – tackling the climate crisis.

I've spent most of the last year working on my fourth book, *One*. Until now I have been gentle in my approach to asking people to shift how they eat, to put plants at the centre of their plates. But time is running out; we need to change how we eat now. And while food and cooking, for me, are absolutely about joy and connection, it's time to stress the changes we need to make. How we eat can actually help to shift the world we live in.

All the information on the climate crisis, and what we as individuals can do, can feel overwhelming. While we need to be real about the seriousness of what's going on, I think as individuals it's important to focus on one manageable step at a time. We make 35,000 decisions a day; that's a lot of potential for change. What we need, of course, is a systematic change in our food system led by our governments; but each small choice we make matters, and it is up to us to make those choices, as well as demanding action from those who hold the power and the purse strings.

If we want to help slow, and one day (hopefully) begin to reverse, climate change, it is widely agreed that the most powerful thing we can do is eat fewer animals and more plants. For you, that might mean one meal a day without meat (though I would encourage more if you can), for others it might mean fine-tuning your vegan diet. However it looks, start from where you are and don't look back.

After eating mostly plants, ensuring the food you buy does not go to waste is the next most impactful thing you can do. Not wasting food is an easy win and a very satisfying one, too. Some simple ways to reduce waste: don't overbuy food, store your food well, and do a quick regular mental inventory of what you have that needs using.

The energy we use when we cook, store and clean up our food is rarely considered as part of the sustainability picture of a meal. Try to cook in one pan or using one heat source; if you turn the oven on, don't preheat it for more than five mins, and try to cook a couple of things at once. If you are cooking in a pan, put a lid on. Make sure your fridge is not overfilled, while your freezer is more efficient if it is full.

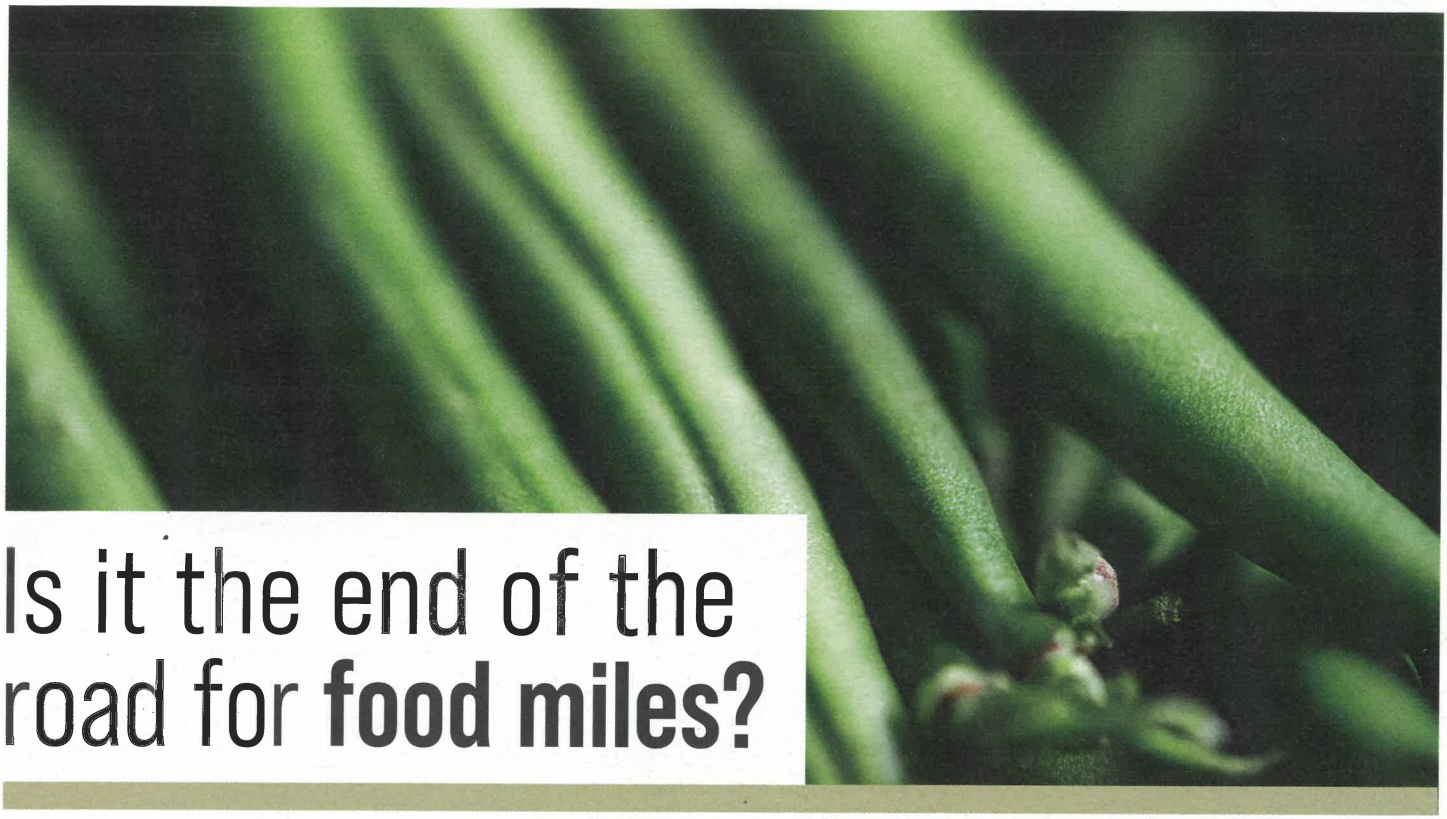
Biodiversity is also an important part of the picture. The world's capacity to produce food is being undermined by our failure to protect plant and animal life. The world currently relies on a handful of crops, many of which are being drastically over-farmed and are decimating soil, animals and habitats. Supporting sustainable farming if you can is a great way to help, as is varying the foods you eat with as many varieties of local fruit, veg, grains, flours and pulses as you can.

Another consideration is how our food gets to our plate. The way I approach it is to think about where the food originates and what season it might be there right now: is that food in season if it's fresh, and, if it's packaged, how long will it last and how quickly will it need to reach its destination to stay in good condition?

> "Time is running out; we need to change how we eat now.

I know some of this stuff might seem obvious and I know many of you will already be doing a lot of this in your homes. If that is you, then can you encourage someone else to make these changes? We don't need a few perfect climate activists, we need a worldwide army making small, frequent and effective changes every day.

One Pot, Pan, Planet by Anna Jones is out now.



Is it the end of the road for **food miles?**

LOUISE GRAY
Author of *Ethical Carnivore*
@loubgray

Have you ever had that moment in the supermarket, most often in spring, when you are looking for British produce? You're looking for the wee Union Jack flag but instead you are drawn to the bright green beans from Kenya?

There is a little black aeroplane on them. The supermarket has labelled this as air freight, and you know it's wrong, but you feel your hand reaching towards them. You are fed up with eating carrots and leeks all winter; you want lovely, squeaky green beans. Is it okay to put them in your basket?

A few years ago, I would have said no, absolutely not. The concept of food miles was all over the newspapers. I knew the best way to cut the carbon footprint on my plate was to reduce the distance food has travelled.

Then I started investigating food miles for my new book about the ethics of our fruit and vegetables, and found it is not quite as straightforward as it seems. The distance food has travelled is not the only factor to consider when looking at the carbon footprint.

Firstly, there is the mode of transport. For example, a banana that has travelled thousands of miles from Costa Rica is still lower carbon than air freight because it floated here on a huge container ship.

Secondly, there is the production method used in growing the food. A tomato grown in a heated greenhouse in Britain may still be higher carbon than a tomato grown outdoors in Spain and trucked in. A number of reports, most recently the food emissions database produced with the UN and published in science journal *Nature*, have concluded that transport is a small part of a food's carbon footprint compared to the emissions from waste and packaging.

Of course, air freight is always going to be higher carbon. Even if we acknowledge that air freighted fruit and vegetables account for less than one per cent of food miles, for the few products that do come by air, emissions are sky high.

The simple solution therefore is to reject fresh produce air freighted into Britain. Avoid food with those stickers showing a little black aeroplane. I would say this is the answer, but I have recently been speaking to the charity Farm Africa about a project helping farmers in Kenya to grow green beans for export. Growing Futures not only improves livelihoods, but is helping young farmers to farm in a more sustainable way, including solar-powered irrigation, introducing bio-pesticides, and a more diverse crop.

I could not bring myself to reject food from this scheme and others like it because the green beans that are not sold in Kenya end up with that aeroplane sticker on them.

Does that mean we should dismiss food miles altogether? I don't think so. Eating local connects you to the seasons and landscape, and is a good starting point for any meal. Even in the so-called Hungry Gap in spring, when British produce is at a low, it is possible to find interesting things to eat like forced rhubarb and even foraged food like wild garlic.

Like so many of the arguments surrounding climate change, the key to cutting carbon cannot be printed on a simple label. The best I could come up with to replace food miles was a quote by the US writer and farmer Wendell Berry: "Eating is an agricultural act." Perhaps instead of food miles, we should consider the farmer who grew our food and how they did so, whether he or she is on your doorstep or the other side of the world.

In her monthly column for Wicked Leeks, Roots to Fruits, Louise Gray distils the complex stories and ethics behind our fruit and veg. Ask her a question @loubgray on Twitter using the hashtag #RootstoFruits, or comment under her articles at www.wickedleeks.com/author/louise-gray.

Can a climate-friendly diet be unearthed in ancient refuse pits?

Looking at past diets could help plan for future climate resilience.

CHANTELLE NORTON
Director, Food in Community
@Foodincommun

Enjoying better health while helping to tackle the climate crisis sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Yet tweaking our diet could help with both.

The findings of the EAT Lancet Commission generated debate with their prescription for human and planetary health. Compared with current NHS Eatwell guidelines, they involve consuming increased proportions of plant foods, including whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes. Would this make us more reliant on food imports, or could UK-grown foods satisfy our needs for nutrients and variety?

I asked John Giorgi, an archeobotanist, what UK residents might have eaten in times when people were more reliant on what could be grown locally. Through analyses of English refuse and cesspits we know that fruit, vegetables, pulses, and whole grains (generally eaten as bread, cakes or porridge) formed a large part of the peasant diet, supplemented with meat, and in coastal regions, fish and seafood.

> Nuts and grains were prized in an era when reducing food waste took priority.

Nuts were especially valued. Leafy vegetables generally preserve less well in the archaeological record but were important. John detailed a tempting-sounding array of herbs, stone fruits, apples, pears, soft fruits and wild edibles as part of this historic diet. So far, so good. More variety than I imagined, and by the end of our call, I was feeling hungry!

Some food producers are using this knowledge of the past to identify forgotten foods and techniques that might suit the changing UK climate and help increase the variety of nutritious alternatives.

Ancient grains found in Iron Age settlements, such as spelt and emmer wheat, are again being grown and made into flour, bread, and now pasta and crackers. The keeping qualities of these grains (and of nuts) were prized in an era when reducing spoilage and food waste took priority over ease of processing. With food waste being an important driver of carbon emissions, perhaps these trade-offs could be re-examined?

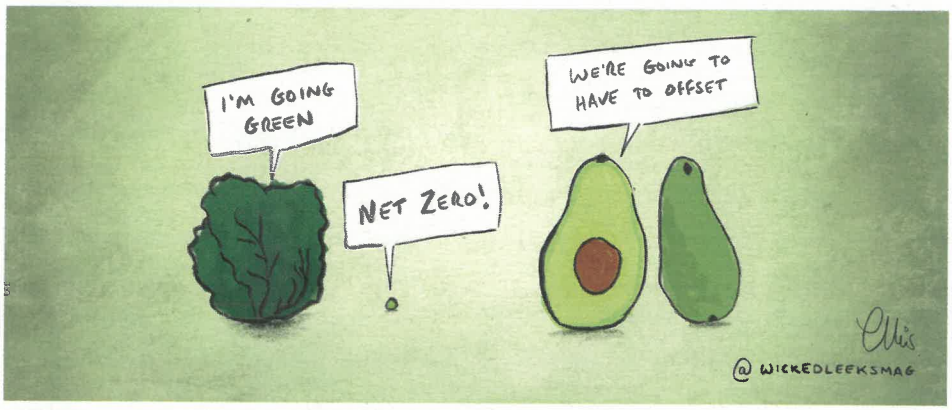
In medieval England, grains were grown as mixtures or 'populations', to reduce the risk of crop failure, an old technique with renewed potential in a changing climate. This potential is being explored using 'population' wheat grown and milled in Devon at Dartington Mill.

Others are using mixed planting techniques for non-grain-based food production. Martin Crawford of the Agroforestry Research Trust draws on natural ecosystems for his inspiration. Forest gardens, containing a mixture of trees, shrubs and perennial plants, are designed for improved resilience against climate change, as well as producing a useful array of edibles, some uncommon on UK plates.

Tackling the climate and health crises with diet sounds fanciful, but lessons from the past are valuable because they can open our collective minds to what could be achieved, and may even represent a step in the transition to a more climate-friendly future.

Our emissions, **our responsibility**

GUY SINGH-WATSON
Founder, Riverford



Type 'carbon offsetting' into the web, and a multitude of sites will offer to ease your guilt about flying, driving or consumption, usually by planting trees in a distant land, mediated by newly founded companies trading in carbon.

The implication is that for a very modest sum, perhaps £100 per year, you will have done your bit and can carry on as usual. Trading sub-prime mortgages was a con perpetrated by 'market rationalists', which brought the global economy to its knees. Carbon trading, advocated by similar logic, delays meaningful action on climate change, and is a threat to life on this planet.

Faced with a rising tide of public demand, businesses and governments have declared that they will achieve net zero emissions by the year 20-something. The problem is that most have not even decided what emissions to measure, and fewer still have a credible plan to reduce them to zero – other than by paying the global south to plant trees, in a trade with uncomfortable parallels to our imperialist past.

At Riverford, we are convinced of the need to progress to net zero faster than the commonly used 2050 date. But we have to get the 'how' right as well as the 'when', and the 'how' cannot mean just offshoring the problem. It has to start with reducing our emissions in every possible area, however unglamorous: indications are that we can reduce our emissions by 40-50 per cent through measures such as solar panels, electric vehicles, better refrigeration, better sourcing and route planning (with some reliance on emerging technologies). We are now working on the other 50-60 per cent.

There isn't enough land on Earth for tree planting to be every organisation's solution – and it would be even more wrong to pay the global south to do it for us, even if we trusted the governance and marketplace, which we don't.

So, we have begun work on answers closer to home, using our natural assets and knowledge. There are promising land-based solutions, using soil, trees and hedges, especially on marginal land. Most require research, development, verification.

In the meanwhile, having researched and interrogated providers, I can assure you that carbon trading is a very poor substitute for taking responsibility for your own (individual, company, or nation's) impact. If someone tells you that they will reach net zero, I urge you not to be impressed until they have told you how. We haven't cracked the problem yet, but you'll be hearing a lot more as our plans develop.

At Wicked Leeks, our mission is to inform and inspire positive change. And you can help.

Our journalism is free to all, but we want to reach as many people as possible who share our desire for a better world. We know our readers are some of the biggest advocates of sustainable living, and you can help grow this movement by sharing articles with friends and on social media, and joining the conversation.

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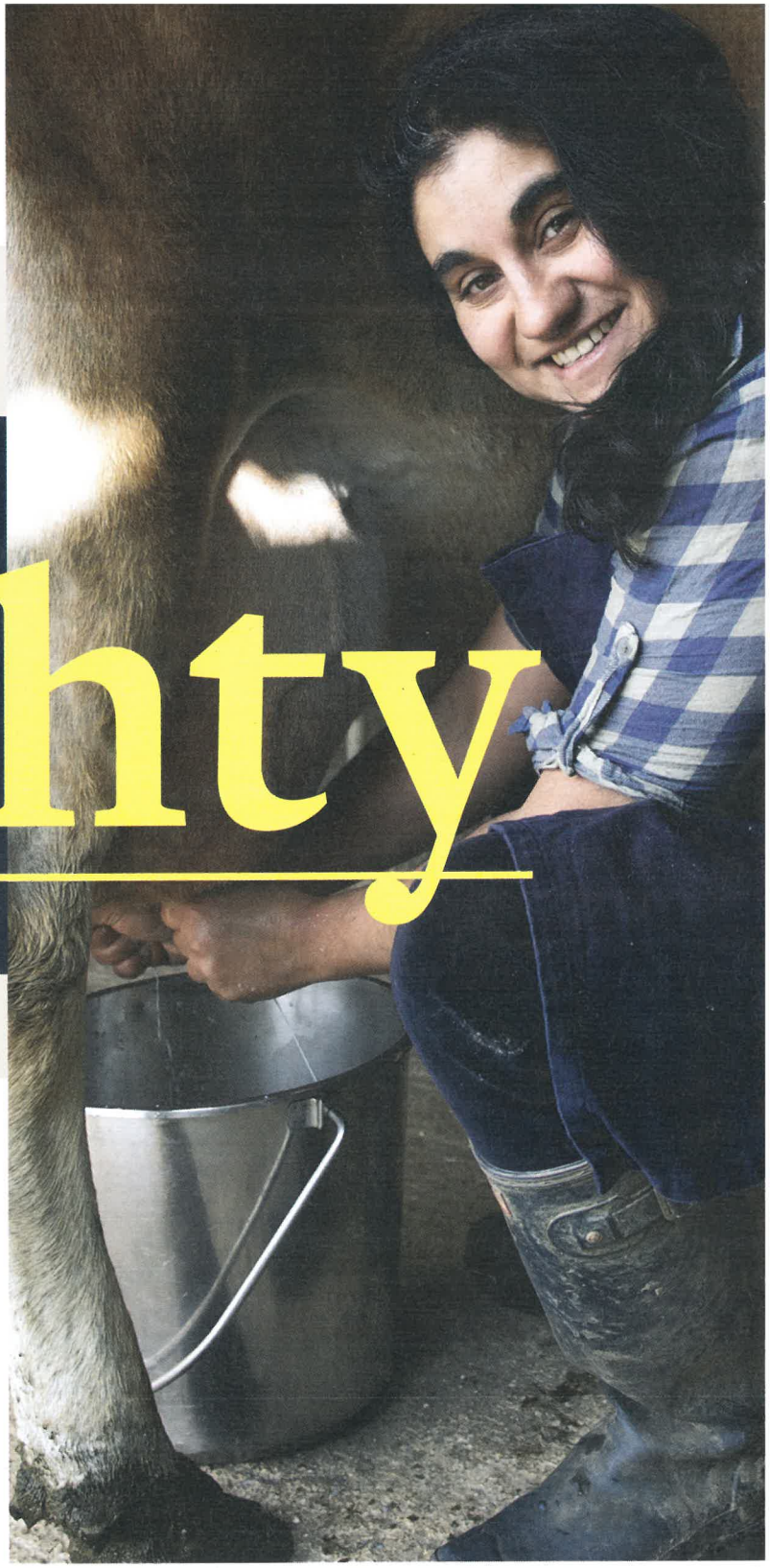
Small but mighty



Jyoti Fernandes takes Nina Pullman inside the local food revolution of the last year, and explains why small farmers are unionised, empowered and 'part of something bigger'.

If you look back over the last year of game-changing societal shifts, among the public health crisis, the distancing and the isolation, one new trend to reach public consciousness was the resilience of small-scale food producers.

Back in March 2020, when the first waves of the pandemic were beginning to affect supermarkets through panic buying, stockpiling or the worry of mass shopping, reports emerged of small, independent food suppliers pivoting quietly but confidently into the gap.

Joining forces with other producers, sending out boxes, planting more veg – it perhaps came as a surprise to those who believe supermarkets are the stalwarts in times of crisis. And in due course, the retail sector did adapt and step up.

But the emergence of local food networks came as no surprise to Jyoti Fernandes. As a founding member of The Landworkers' Alliance (LWA), the union representing landworkers, foresters and small farmers, she has been deeply embedded in this sector for years and is well aware of just how organised and resilient it can be.

"When lockdown hit, loads of producers lost their markets overnight if they were selling into pubs and restaurants. And then there was a huge demand for boxes across the board, from your smallest producers to your largest," she says, over Zoom in early March. "There was a 113 per cent increase in the number of veg box deliveries. Almost all the producers said they couldn't scale up rapidly enough, so there was actually an unmet demand."

Despite this turning point in the prominence of Britain's local food scene, 12

Credit Kathryn Miller

Fighting for land and social justice: Jyoti Fernandes of The Landworkers' Alliance

> What we're providing, as small-scale producers selling to the local economy, is really important. It's looking after the landscape, biodiversity, supplying local food and employment.

Credit Kathryn Miller

months on and that hasn't really gone beyond a surface perception of bucolic farmgate veg boxes, or more importantly, turned into meaningful government support.

Fernandes herself came into the sector via what she calls "the dark side" and a stint in the US working on international trade deals at The Carter Center, in Atlanta, where she saw those who had never even been to the country, let alone a farm, writing agreements that would reshape entire supply chains and landscapes.

"I really noticed how different the policy world was, and it's the same today with Defra. Many of the civil servants working on agriculture policy have never even visited a farm," she says.

"So we came to England and started doing the traditional path that a lot of new entrant farmers do, where we went Wwoofing [working on organic farms], picked up skills, tried to find a bit of land with no money," she says, with an infectious laugh that reappears regularly and is no doubt a sense of humour that comes in handy when dealing with a fight against nothing less than the entire globalised food economy.

The way Fernandes describes small farming is so much more political and radical than the idyllic vision of 'local food' charted by the mainstream press, not least through the struggle to access land.

"There are people all over the place trying to come up with ideas and ways to fight against the system and find their way onto the land," says Fernandes, who is the LWA's head of all things trade and politics, as well as a small farmer herself.

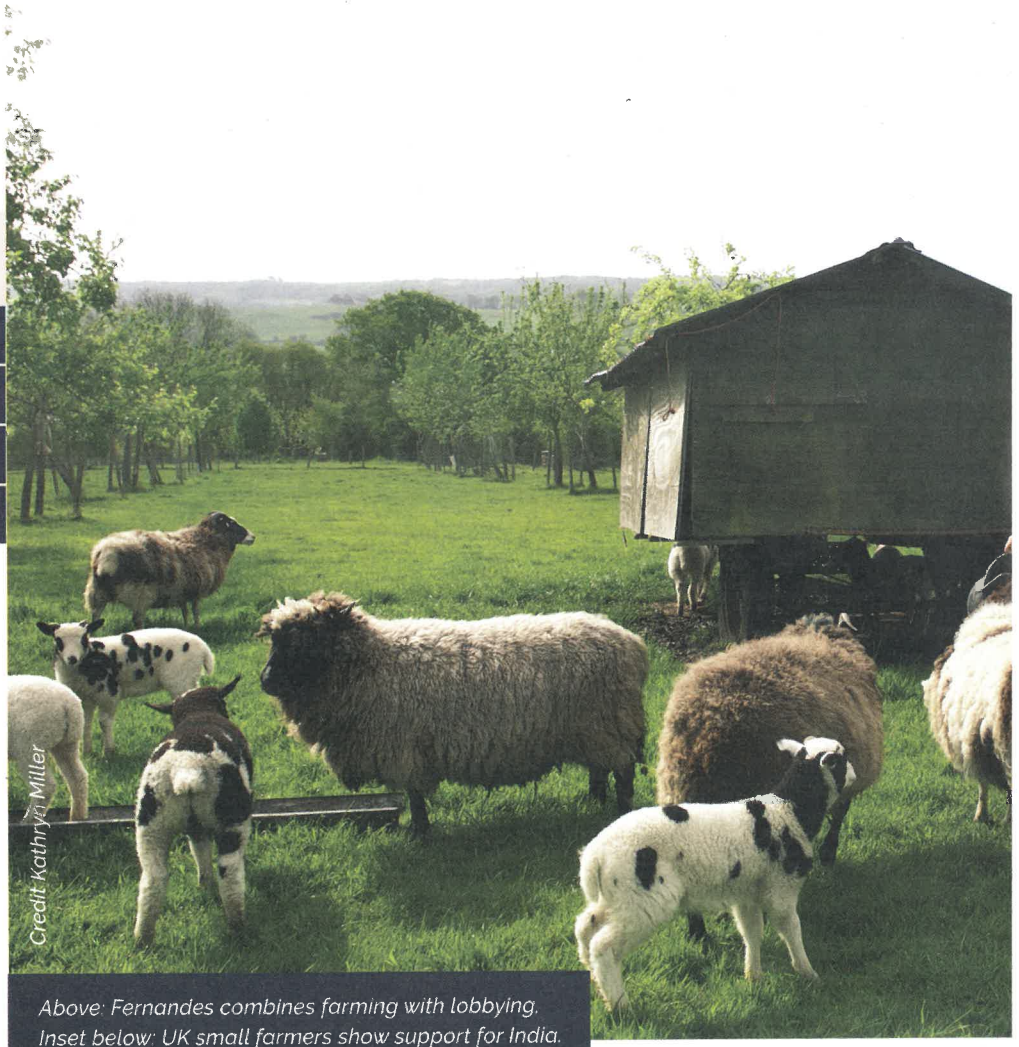
"Because what we're providing, as small-scale producers selling to the local economy, is really important. It's looking after the landscape, bringing back biodiversity, supplying local food, employment, all of that, but why has it not got the support it needs?"

There was a 113 per cent increase in local veg box deliveries when lockdown first hit

It's a fair point, and one you'd think might be on the agenda. Not so, unfortunately, as in the weeks after we speak, Defra announces its much-touted new farming subsidies will cut out any farm under five hectares. Surely they're too small to count, you might think. But actually there are 20,000 such small farms in the UK, and many of them, according to Fernandes, are unionised, empowered and growing rapidly.

Only in the last month, the LWA has taken on several new roles and now has 32 full-time employees, operating as a kind of NFU alternative since setting up in 2012. "As a union, that's given us access to positions and being able to be called for evidence because we're recognised stakeholders," says Fernandes. "Which makes it quite different as

> The way the food system is set up, you're always in competition with things that can be produced cheaper.



Above: Fernandes combines farming with lobbying. Inset below: UK small farmers show support for India.

Defra's required to consult with us on policy that affects us. So it gets us into places where an outside organisation wouldn't be able to."

So who are the people and producers behind our local food supply? Fernandes paints an interesting picture, again more radical than you might imagine.

"It works for a lot of people as you combine that kind of self sufficiency with building your home, or supplying your own electricity or whatever it is, which saves your cost of living and means you can live more cheaply, and live a richer life with less money," she says. "And that's complemented by a business that actually serves the local community."

Aside from the lobbying, there is a strong sense of mutual support and community provided by the union that Fernandes stresses is just as integral. As she puts it: "Because it feels good to be part of something that's bigger than yourself, you know?

"People can spend so much time weeding carrots or packing boxes, because they really believe in it, and they want a career that's providing nutritious food to the community, or they don't want to be contributing to the climate and biodiversity crises.

"But you can be on your own quite a lot of the time, and the way that the food system is set up, you're always in competition with things that can be produced cheaper. To produce something differently can be really hard work and a lot of people take that upon themselves. They have a lower income, they might live in caravans or don't take any holidays – whatever it is. The quality of life is good because these people are doing what they want to be doing, but it can be really hard work."

It's also why the LWA has expanded to be part of a global movement, La Via Campesina, which translates as 'the peasant life' and represents peasant, or small-scale, farmers and their fight for social and environmental justice across the world.

But as Fernandes sees it, the interest in international issues is also closely related to mainstream food supply across the UK and western Europe. Take last month, and a largely unreported fire in migrant picker housing in Spain's key veg growing region. The LWA sent aid and solidarity, and in doing so wants to send a message for people to think about where their food comes from.

"These people work incredibly long hours in these huge polytunnels, and they're calling on consumers at supermarkets who buy these tomatoes to realise the conditions of these workers and their human rights," says Fernandes.

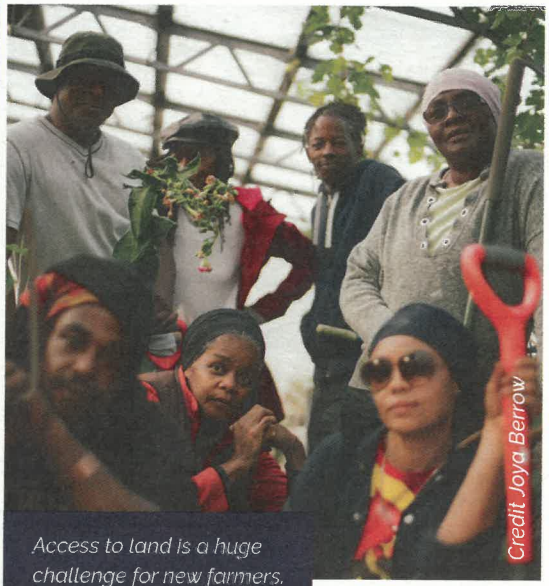
Another topical campaign is the huge uprising by Indian farmers against proposed new agriculture reform laws, a mobilisation and demonstration of numbers that again was no surprise to Fernandes, whose family comes from India's Karnataka state.

"India has a huge small farmer network: there are millions and millions of small farms. They're the largest producer of milk in the world but it's people with small herds of two to four cows," she says. "India also has a real culture of awareness since the time of Gandhi, there's a huge amount of understanding of political mobilisation and how that all works. The farmers' movement in Karnataka was one of the original La Via Campesina organisations to get started and help create this global movement.

"And since the 90s they've been doing regular trainings with all the farmers in the movement, in every state across India. So they're already very, very aware; they know what's happening and they know their entire livelihood is at stake."

The way Fernandes describes it, small farmers are an untapped, latent force who could rise up and create an alternative, fairer and more sustainable world and food system. Is the ultimate aim for small farmers to feed the world? According to Fernandes, they already do.

"The forces that promote the globalised food system have the dominant voice; on a political level they've got the power. The corporations that promote that are both



Access to land is a huge challenge for new farmers.

Credit Joya Berrow

> We've got Liz Truss who is signing all these trade agreements, which will undermine British producers of all size.

powerful and nasty. And they know how to put down dissent; it's very difficult to move against that," she says.

"But the statistics show that actually the majority of global food security is provided by small farms; 70 per cent of global food security is through farms and local supply chains using only 30 per cent of agricultural resource."

If the recent uprising of small farmers in India has succeeded in anything, and why so many organisations across the world have offered support, it's been to put these numbers on display to the world.

Back in the UK, Fernandes hopes the interest in local food since the pandemic will translate into something more tangible. "I think that pressure needs to be clearer," she says. "I think we need to step it up, and I'm hoping we can embark on a 'vocal for local' campaign and focus on government and how strong that interest is. We want resources to go into supporting local supply chains, because there's contradictory stuff going on.

"On the one hand, we've got Liz Truss who is signing all these trade agreements, which will undermine British producers of all scales, and the NFU announcing free advice for anyone wanting to export. Where's the free advice for people who want to set up a local, short supply chain? There's no free advice provided for that, there's no support system."

The ambition is huge and the motivation fierce, but perhaps what gives the small farmer movement most heart is the ability to focus on the fulfilment of the day job and celebrating small wins. With that in mind, while the rest of Fernandes' day involves a couple of media interviews, and a meeting of the union's BIPOC group to discuss how to tackle a lack of diversity on the land, she will end the day by milking her three cows.

Does she ever take a day off? More laughter, and it appears not, before she adds: "I'm taking off for two months this summer because I'm building a new barn." Shelter for the coming winter and, perhaps, the coming revolution.

JYOTI ON...

VERTICAL FARMING

I think it's reasonably harmless, but it's definitely not a solution. The biggest problem I have with vertical farming is government trade off in R&D into tech. They're more likely to fund vertical farming because it's techy, more than buying a bit of land in a peri urban area for a community farm. A lot of the vertical farms focus on micro greens and lettuces, often it can be niche and high-end stuff, and very little actual sustenance.

MEAT VERSUS PLANT-BASED

The most important thing is we get rid of factory farming and grain-fed livestock. We're very pro small-scale livestock farming because for many small producers across the world it's a very important source of livelihood and nutrition. For personal consumption, it's less and better. Eat meat as a much smaller part of your diet, maybe once a week, but choose the best quality possible. Vegan diets are fantastic and the more vegans the better, but eat locally produced UK-grown stuff, not loads of imports.

GENE EDITING

We're totally opposed to it being deregulated and we believe the precautionary principle needs to be applied to gene-edited crops. It entrenches the whole industrial model. Our main thing is to not look particularly at the science, but to look at the politics and the power involved.

TECHNOLOGY

Is it fixable? Who owns it? Does it support diversified systems? Or does it support monocultures? If it's a small-scale decentralised thing that's really fixable, then it can really enhance. If it's a big bit of kit that requires huge fields of monocultures, that's a bit of a problem.

Country of origin unknown: A lack of transparency can lead to lower standards.

Spice up your rack

From worker exploitation to pesticides and wild sourcing – Nina Pullman traces some of the ethical issues behind our store cupboard staples, and how to avoid them.

Have you ever looked at your spice rack and wondered where they came from? Who grew them, picked them, milled them, what do their landscapes and livelihoods look like? Probably not, and you won't be the only one.

Those little pots of spices, colourful as they are, give away very little in terms of origin. Add to that the oils, sauces, even garlic, herbs and ginger, which make up a home cook's essential toolkit, and the whole category of store cupboard staples appears to have escaped the growing scrutiny we might apply to other food categories, particularly fruit, veg and meat.

But all of those products have the same food supply chains behind them. They were still grown in soil at some point, probably with pesticides, and affected by the same worker rights and environmental issues as any other food.

Spices and other store cupboard staples also have a few more specific issues, according to specialist suppliers. "Countries like India and Egypt are huge herb and spice producing countries but have some inherent risks to do with traditional cultural practices," explains Matt Richards, supplier relationships manager at Organic Herb Trading, which imports organic herbs and spices.

"For example, children working as part of the family unit is the norm (as it is the world over), but it is sometimes difficult for authorities to enforce the international regulations on child labour in remote parts. We cover this in our own audits, and through the majority of the product we buy from India being certified 'Fair' (Fairtrade, Fair for Life), but for the wider industry it is something that is a risk." It's not always a case of exploitation, although of course that does exist, according to Richards, but rather educating communities on the importance of child education.

Then there is the impact of wild ingredients, particularly herbs, which are often not harvested from a sustainable source. "This can threaten species, but also whole ecosystems by upsetting the ecological balance," says Richards, who says Organic Herb Trading relies on certifications like FairWild and organic when sourcing wild harvested herbs from Eastern Europe.

A large percentage of spices are grown in India.

Organic, while standards may vary globally, guards against the use of artificial chemicals in production of any product. But as intensive agriculture encroaches on organic land, the problem of pesticide 'drift', affecting organic ingredient growers across the world, is threatening what little supply there is. "This is a constant threat; pressure on land use is threatening organic supply globally," says Richards.

In any case, the very few organic spices you might find in supermarkets gives you a sense of their availability. As Riverford is the only recipe box kit to adhere to 100 per cent organic principles, head of recipes and cook Kirsty Hale knows first-hand just

> "One of the things I look for is price, especially on organic. If something is too cheap, there's usually a reason why.

how challenging this can be. "It does mean that our range is a bit more restrained, so we have to be a bit more creative with our vegetables," she says. "We had to stop using cumin for a while, because there's only one organic cumin producer in the world, in Turkey, and something happened to their shipment to the UK. Taking it out of recipes felt so strange to me as a chef. I had to take it out or sub it for other ingredients like organic fennel seed or ground coriander."

Hale says there are more organic ingredients available nowadays, but she still scours health food shops to find new suppliers, while some things are just plain impossible to source to certain credentials. "The one thing we really struggle with is some of the Asian ingredients, because there are a lot of sauces in standard Asian fare, and they're not always ethically created. For example, Thai fish sauce; you can't get it organically. It has to do with some of the fishing methods," she says, adding that instead she uses an ethical soy.

"It's often about where they are produced in the world. Perhaps organic production isn't a thing, or maybe it's produced naturally but not certified," she says.

And therein lies the problem – sometimes you just can't have an ethical alternative.

"There's usually a reason why if you can't find it on the shelf," says Geetie Singh-Watson, who opened the UK's first organic pub in London over 25 years ago. These days, Singh-Watson runs The Bull Inn in Totnes, where everything is either 100 per cent organic or sourced through worker cooperatives, and chefs have to learn flexibility from day one.

"For my chefs, the hardest thing they learn is to adapt; we don't have constant supply from any supplier. The flexibility we have to have in our thinking is huge," she says. "I choose organic, Fairtrade and worker cooperatives in that order. And also independents are really important."

The lack of transparency in ingredient supply chains means producers are more vulnerable to exploitation, as there is very little chance any consumer will hear about it or complain, hence the value placed on cooperatives by wholesalers such as Essential. "For us, it is all about ethical relationships," says Essential's buying director, Jasper Beese. "It's okay to have a supplier sign a form that states, 'we pay a living wage to our workers' or 'we do not use child labour', but it's only when you actually visit them that you get a true insight."

Anonymous supply chains also leave room for more organised exploitation. "In the past, we have been made aware of organised crime, especially in southern Europe," says Beese. "Organic producer titles have been bought and then cheap products have been dumped on the market, enabling them to launder money. The product seemed good, but nearly half the price."

So how can the average consumer navigate this unseen world of ingredient sustainability? Ask questions, suggests Richards at Organic Herb Trading, who says consumers should be "brave and inquisitive", rather than boycotting specific herbs or countries. Meanwhile, price is a good instinct to hone when it comes to ethical choices, says Hale, as an indicator of lower standards somewhere along the line. "You can pay a whole £1 more for the same weight in nuts and there's a good reason for that," she adds.

Worker cooperatives such as Essential prioritise fair trade.

It's echoed by Beese at Essential, who says: "One of the things I always look for when doing a grocery shop is the price, especially on organic. If something is too cheap, there is probably a reason why."

But not everyone can afford to pay the extra prices, and that goes for consumers and businesses. Founder of Indian home cooking recipe box SpiceBox, Grace Regan, says her aim is to source everything organically, but as a small business in London, it's not yet financially possible. "There's this constant friction between making the best decision when it comes to sourcing, and making the figures add up," she says. Regan sources organic rice and flour as two high volume products for which she can afford to pay more.

And it's also not just down to the individual, believes Singh-Watson, who says: "Consumers can't be expected to take responsibility for those things – it's our government and the supermarkets' responsibility to provide us with the choices that support societal and environmental values."

Back to the spice rack, and the stories behind those jars – perhaps one proactive step is simply to be curious. As Hale puts it: "Think of it as a constant work in progress. And share your knowledge with friends and family."

ETHICAL INGREDIENTS: THE DIRECTORY

- **Essential Trading**
- **Suma Wholefoods**
- **Organic Herb Trading**
- **Westcountry Spice**
- **Bart Ingredients**
- Your local ethical independent, such as **Unicorn** in Manchester, **Beanies** in Sheffield or **Hisbe** in Brighton
- Organic recipe box providers, such as **Riverford**

The north face of farming

Scottish farming is associated with rugged conditions and poor land only suitable for livestock, but there is a growing progressive movement that wants to change this perception, finds Jack Thompson.

"Things take a long time on Skye," explains Phil Knott, a crofter and fruit grower on the Isle of Skye. "The ground is difficult, there's lots of rain, the latitude is against us, the salt-laden gales are a challenge. Even growing trees is a challenge. Growing fruit can be done, but it's a challenge."

There's a temptation to think of Scotland as a rugged, wild land that is only good for sheep and cattle farming. But while the conditions on the Isle of Skye are certainly tricky, Knott wants to refute this long-held view.

"You can grow pears here if you want," he says. "I'm not going to have 20,000 pears and I'm not going to be supplying Sainsbury's, but I can supply the local shop. I can feed my family and neighbours."

Scotland can produce pears.

Knott has a three-hectare croft, a type of small farm particular to the Scottish Highlands and Isles governed by its own set of laws, on the scenic Sleat Peninsula in north west Skye. As a former wildlife and land management expert, he also comes into crofting with an 'untraditional' vision.

"We've put [the land] to fruit and veg, and we're managing the open spaces for nature. We've got the deer fences up and we're establishing fruit trees," says Knott, in a soft Scottish accent.

"I can see how quickly the soil and biodiversity can recover. With little help really, nature can do its own thing if you let it. There's huge potential because the mindset is 'this land is difficult, and you can't do anything but graze it'. That's just not the case, but it does take time," Knott insists.

According to Nikki Yoxall, sustainable farming lead at the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) in Scotland and farmer in Aberdeenshire, this encapsulates Scottish farming perfectly.

"There's this paradox that you find in Scotland: there are pockets of real innovation and creativity, contrasting with people who say, 'it's always been this way and we're never going to change'," she says.

Yoxall, whose own farm specialises in rare and native breeds of cattle, echoes Knott, strongly believing that the 'poor' Scottish land has more potential than people believe.

"People will say that you can't grow tall grass on the west coast because the soil is too poor; over here in Aberdeenshire we're able to get tufted hair grass taller than we are. We're seeing giant dandelions, and that means the soil is able to have capacity for the roots."

As a Soil Association ambassador in Scotland, Yoxall is part of a network of progressive farmers aiming to communicate the value of agroecological farming to the wider public.

"There's ten of us in Scotland and we've all been given support and training on how to create media content so that we can share our story," she explains.

It is a movement that is certainly gaining momentum, and according to Michael Clarke, chair of NFFN Scotland, this is thanks to younger farmers like Yoxall and Knott "who aren't afraid to question how it's always been done."

> This comes at a particularly pivotal time for Scotland, with Brexit and a potential referendum.

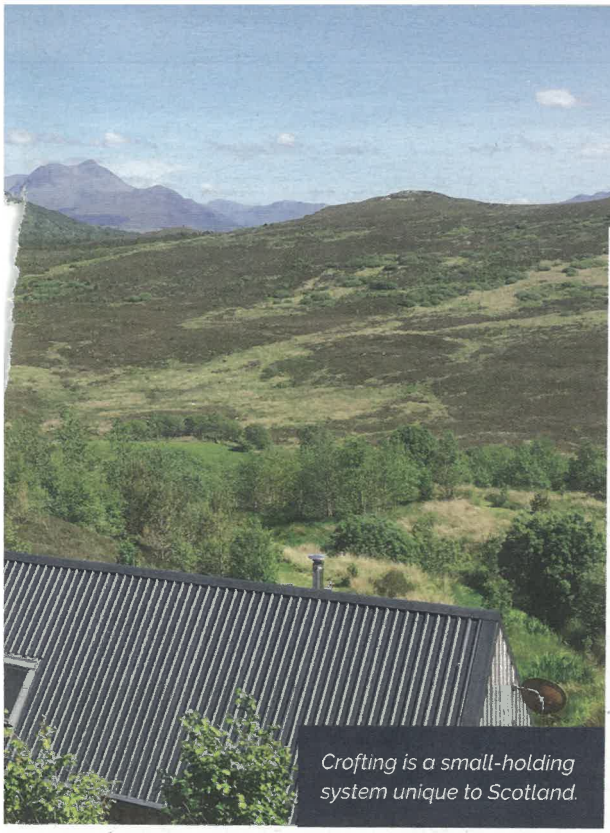
Clarke is no stranger to this concept either, combining conservation with sustainable farming in Dumfriesshire, where his farm has become a haven for rare bird species through a dedication to habitat creation, planting over a kilometre of hedges every year.

He says this is in stark contrast with the general culture of "you're not a real farmer unless you squeeze production out of every square inch", and in a similar vein states that much of the progressive work being done by farmers is "in spite of policy, rather than because of it."

Or as Yoxall frankly puts it: "Anything that is being done in a more regenerative or agroecological fashion is absolutely being done by farmers individually, without support from the government."

This comes at a particularly pivotal moment in Scotland for two reasons. Brexit offers the Scottish government an opportunity to redesign farming policy after 48 years of European subsidies, and even apart from what Westminster rules, since agriculture is a devolved sector.

Equally, as the UN Climate Change



Crofting is a small-holding system unique to Scotland.

Phil Knott grows fruit on the Isle of Skye.

Conference (COP26) takes place in Glasgow this November, the spotlight will be on the UK and Scotland as the host nation to show environmental leadership. However, Clarke says: "The hosting of COP26 in Glasgow is having a discernible effect on climate change policy support and the industry's response but, sadly, biodiversity loss hardly figures and remains the poor relation.

"A win for biodiversity could be a win for climate change, it's by no means always the other way around."

On top of this there is the prospect of another independence referendum very much in the foreground, but this is little reason to celebrate, according to Clarke.

"It would not be good news for our sort of farming," Clarke stresses. Agroecological farmers like Clarke, Knott and Yoxall, are still very much in the minority, so supporting conventional farming is likely to garner more votes for Scottish politicians hoping to bring independence to the nation.

"There are a lot of votes in supporting mainstream farming, and they're worried about upsetting and disturbing the bandwagon too much," Clarke reflects.

Despite this, there is cause for positivity, whether it's Knott witnessing his soil's rapid recovery on the Isle of Skye, or Yoxall's confidence in the progressive farming community who have come together through Zoom during the pandemic.

Clarke on the other hand finds solace in the passion of the younger farming generation such as Knott and Yoxall. "I think the fact you've got younger people pushing this, that is my main cause for optimism."

Top of the crofts

Over 80 per cent of Scottish land is deemed poorer quality. The nation's policies and subsidy system are representative of this.

Crofting is a system of small landholding **unique to the Scottish Highlands and Isles.** It comes with its own laws and only applies in certain areas of Scotland, known as the crofting counties.

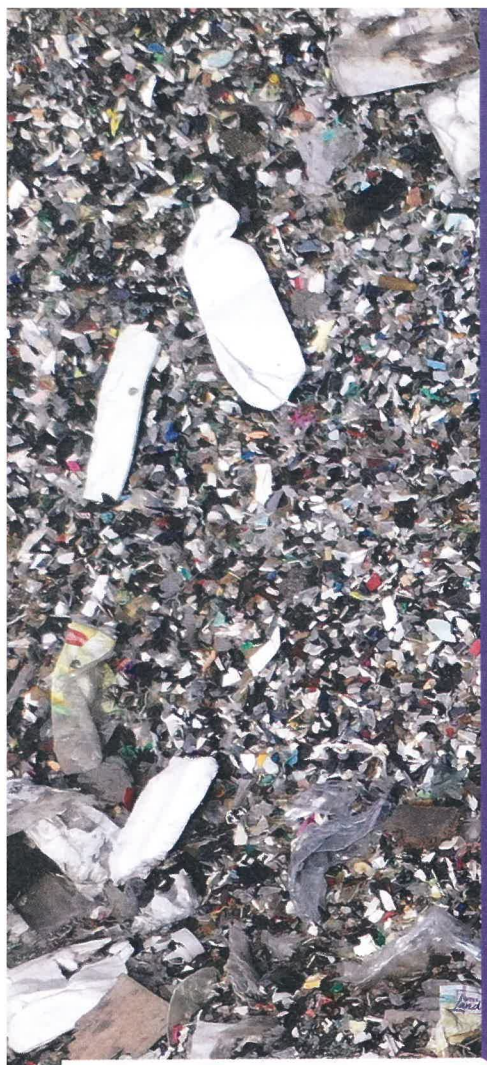
—

Crofters have a duty to be a resident, or live **within 32 km of their croft** to not to neglect their croft; to cultivate their croft and put it to purposeful use.

—

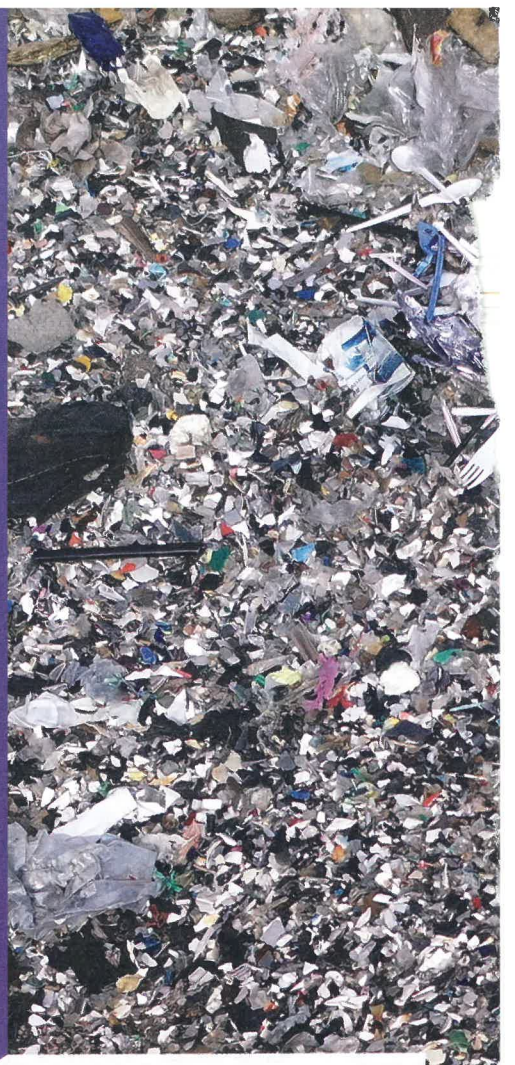
There are **20,867 crofts in Scotland,** averaging five ha.

Organic recipe boxes
As we move into May, enjoy a summer of veg-packed recipe boxes to go with your al fresco dining.
RIVERFORD ORGANIC FARMERS
riverford.co.uk/organic-recipe-boxes



The UK's dirty plastic secret

How the UK's failure to stop plastic waste exports is leading to dangerous environmental impacts and illegal disposal in Malaysian communities. Megan Tatum reports.



By early 2018, residents living in Jenjarom had had enough.

For months, the small Malaysian town had been exposed to toxic fumes spewed out by illegal plastics factories. Many locals had fallen sick. Many more were forced to seal their doors and windows each night to block out the acrid smog.

Frustrated and fearful, residents scoured the area, jotting down GPS coordinates of illegal sites to share with authorities. They campaigned for tighter controls. And called for an abrupt end to the 17,000 tonnes of plastic waste dumped on their doorstep – much of it shipped over from developed countries like the UK.

At first, their plight – and that of other communities across south east Asia, turned into dumping grounds for global waste – drew international attention. There was public outcry, and assurances from governments responsible that they'd do better.

But, two years later, it seems little has changed.

According to Greenpeace Malaysia, the UK exported 537,000 tonnes of plastic waste in 2020. Of that, Malaysia received 64,440 tonnes (12 per cent) – an increase of 63 per cent. It wasn't only the UK, either. In the first eight months of the year, plastic waste exports from the US to Asia also spiked by 32 per cent, according to the Census Bureau.

> According to Greenpeace, the UK exported 537,000 tonnes of plastic waste in 2020.

So, why hasn't the developed world cleaned up its act?

"It makes me so angry that this is still happening," says Sirine Rached, of Zero Waste Europe and the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA). "We're in the middle of a global pandemic and we're setting ourselves up for a global cancer pandemic. We're severely undermining our environment when we can't afford to do so."

Just as the residents of Jenjarom spotted, the influx of plastic waste across south east Asia began in 2018. Prior to then, China had imported the majority: nearly nine million tonnes annually. But with as much as 70.6 per cent of that reportedly buried, burned or mismanaged, the Chinese government enacted the National Sword Policy from January 2018, a blanket ban of plastic imports.

For developed countries like the UK, which exports around two thirds of the plastics it produces, that created an urgent need for an alternative. As a result, shipments were quickly diverted to Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines,

among other developing countries, where unscrupulous traders took advantage of the plastic windfall, accepting waste illegally.

When, in July 2018, Yeo Bee Yin was sworn in as Malaysia's environment minister, it was the first challenge handed to her, she says. "By the end of 2018 we had closed 100 illegal factories. But they kept mushrooming in other places, or even reopening in the same place."

Checking the country's ports, it was UK supermarket carrier bags or plastic bottles from Germany that arrived each day in shipping containers, she recalls. "We realised how big the problem of foreign waste was. In many foreign countries, people diligently separate their waste, thinking that it's all sent for recycling. But it's actually being dumped in developing countries."

The impact of these illegal sites can be disastrous, both for the environment and for the health of local communities. In Indonesia, locals found high levels of dioxins in eggs collected near a factory that burns plastics for fuel, explains Yuyun Ismawati, co-founder of the Nexus Foundation for Environmental Health and Development. "The levels were the second highest in Asia, and the fifth highest in the world," she says.

Then there are the severe rises in air pollution and the damage to wildlife that arise from these vast dumping sites, often covered by a thin layer of shredded plastics and soil.

One site discovered by campaigners spanned the size of six football fields, and scaled two storeys, says researcher Wong Pui Yi, who has investigated the impact in Malaysia.

At both a national and a local level there has been significant pushback from developing countries. As of June 2020, for example, 225 shipping containers sent illegally to Malaysia had been sent back to their source – 47 from the UK alone.

But it's developed countries that ultimately need to take responsibility, insists Greenpeace campaigner Hen Kiah Chun. "Developed countries should stop putting responsibility for their own plastic problem onto other countries," he says.

There are signs of progress. In January 2021, for instance, the European Commission announced a complete ban on exports to developing (non-OECD) countries of non-recyclable plastic waste. Plus, the same month, amendments to the Basel Convention came into force, an international agreement to which the UK is a signee. Going forward, contaminated and mixed plastics that require processing before they can be recycled will need to secure what's called 'Prior Informed Consent' (PIC) from the receiving country before being shipped.

Top: The UK exports much of its waste. Above: Burning plastic releases toxins.

This doesn't go far enough though, believes Rached, of Zero Waste Europe.

"The Basel Convention was always meant to ban developed countries from exporting waste that harms the environment and human health to importing countries – and the only reason we ended up with 'prior consent' rather than a ban is because the agreement got watered down," she says.

The UK government does also say it plans to consult on a ban to non-OECD countries. Though not until the end of 2022. "We are clear that the UK should handle more of its waste at home, and that's why we are committed to banning the export of plastic waste to non-OECD countries and clamping down on illegal waste exports through tougher controls," a Defra spokesperson tells Wicked Leeks.

But even that won't solve the issue, says Rached.

"Banning exports to non-OECD countries as some UK parties have mooted is a start but it's not enough, as OECD countries such as Turkey have been severely affected by UK plastic waste exports too." In fact, in 2020, 39 per cent of all plastic exports from the UK ended up in the European country.

The only solution, she believes, is a complete ban on all exports. "We should take responsibility for our own waste – otherwise we'll never fully commit to waste prevention and a zero waste approach that acknowledges planetary boundaries, biodiversity collapse and the climate emergency."

What's clear is that, for communities like the one in Jenjarom, little has changed. Local campaigners still spend their nights scouring the area for illegal sites, with many factories still burning plastics under cover of darkness.

"We will chase them until they can't stand," says local activist Pua Lay Peng. "There is a strong sense of crisis pushing me. I simply know that if I don't stand up, the whole village will be ruined."

A regional answer to food supply

Above: CoFarm wants to set up a network of community farms.

Global food supply faces climate and political volatility, while hyperlocal networks can struggle with efficiency and demand. Could regional food networks be the most climate resilient food system? Anna Turns reports.

Brexit, Covid-19 and most recently the Suez Canal debacle have all highlighted the fragility of long, convoluted supply chains with numerous middlemen. But at the other end of the spectrum, micro food networks can also be susceptible to bad weather, sudden changes in demand or simply lack of footfall.

By their very nature, hyperlocal supply chains can potentially limit the diversity of available produce, while tight geographical boundaries can translate to fewer customers.

So could regionalisation be the answer to future-proofing our farming system and empowering citizens by ensuring known provenance, while also creating more resilient food networks that can weather the coming storms?

Gareth Roberts, co-founder of Regather, a cooperative supplying organic fruit and veg boxes to 800 homes in Sheffield, thinks it's all about finding a balance. "There just isn't enough comprehension of the geography of food systems," says Roberts, who is working hard to increase the proportion of locally grown produce that Regather sells, but prefers to use the term 'localised' rather than local. He explains that whether we like it or not, we are firmly embedded in a globalised food system and simply switching from one extreme to the other may produce a different but still undesirable set of outcomes.

Ultimately it's a trade-off, according to Roberts. Longer supply chains might mean that seasonal produce can be grown more efficiently in its natural climate. If that same produce is grown locally, farmers might be forced to add more pesticides and fertilisers to produce the necessary yield, or perhaps turn to polytunnels to recreate warmer climes with much higher energy inputs.

"We're a long way off a thriving regional food system but we're working towards it. At the right scale, somewhere between small and enormous, there's got to be a balance that allows for skilled growers to navigate the seasons in a way that keeps things viable."

Of course, there's no one size fits all, and British farmland is far from homogenous, but if a complex mix of landscapes is the starting point, farming decisions about what to grow can be based on what is optimal for certain soils and climates.

Box schemes like Regather base their buying models on this; buying from where things grow best geographically. "Customers make an informed decision to hand over that choice in return for trust and that allows us and other schemes to maintain our market share," says Roberts.

"As buyers we can then get the best seasonal produce that's geographically available. By its very nature, this type of food system is more resilient, but it's driven by consumer behaviour and that shift in mindset is key."

A shift in agricultural practices is important, too. Farming is "a force for change" according to the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission's *Our Future, Our Land* report that lays out plans for a fourth agricultural revolution, "transitioning to agroecological farming by 2030 to tackle soil erosion, loss of wildlife and genetic diversity". Agroecology combines agriculture with ecological principles, with particular focus on small-scale farms.

In fact, more than 50 per cent of fruit and veg are grown on farms smaller than 20 hectares, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which has declared 2021 the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables globally. A recent study by the University of British Columbia in Canada and published in the journal *Nature*, concluded that small farms tend to have higher crop yields than large farms, and host more biodiversity.

Tapping into this network of smaller farms could be key to the transition to agroecology. Gavin Shelton, founder of CoFarm in Cambridge, wants to replicate his pilot urban community farm with at least one in every local authority by 2030; that's about 450 across the UK.

By eventually farming up to 500 acres at each CoFarm, he hopes to contribute a substantial amount of food to local communities. "We need an agroecological future – agroecology ticks all of the boxes for how to get to a sustainable food system, which is fair and nobody is exploited. So by scaling up in this way, we can direct profits back to ecosystems and prioritise access to healthy food," he says.

Sharing knowledge will be key to making this model work, both in terms of what a specific microclimate is best suited to, and also what people most want to eat in that area – in Cambridge that has meant dedicating one polytunnel to Asian veg and curry leaves as requested by the Indian diaspora.

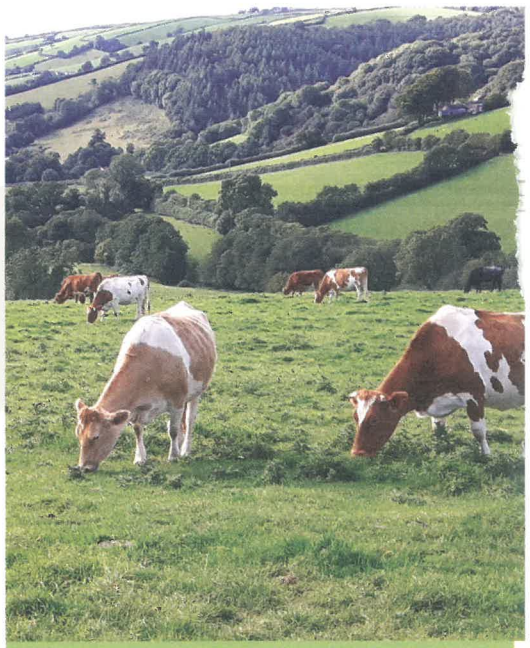
"Last year we grew 55 different types of vegetables on our pilot site – it's all about adapting to local circumstances," adds Shelton. "It's resilience in its broadest sense – we're trying to do something quite holistic with CoFarm, from improving health and wellbeing, to restoring natural capital, to producing great food. The current food system is quite extractive in economic terms but we think it can be used to build more inclusive economies by enabling fairer access at a local level.

"Hyperlocal is a really good place to get to if we can get there, with a bit of a regional buffer built in. It would lead to enhanced food sovereignty and food security, not increased vulnerability," comments Shelton, who argues that making food supply chains more local results in simpler distribution, lower transport costs, less food waste and no need for plastic packaging. "We're dealing with food metres not food miles," he adds.

> "We're a long way from a thriving regional food system but we're working towards it.

Above: Climate resilience will become more important. Left: Small farms are home to more biodiversity.

Batting for biodiversity



Clockwise from above: Organic cows support a diverse ecosystem; Greater Horseshoe bats rely on a variety of insects; Dung beetles are a hidden food supply linchpin.

Bats have a unique link to the cowpats from organic cows that's central to their survival and tells a wider story of ecosystem health, finds Nina Pullman.

It's hard to believe it's all about the cowpats. But for one species of British bat, cowpats, or rather cowpats from organic cows, can be a vital factor in their survival.

Greater Horseshoe bats, one of Britain's 18 species and named for the horseshoe shape on their nose, rely on dung beetles for their young to feed on. But dung beetles are facing a purge of their own thanks to a powerful cattle wormer used by non-organic farmers, which passes out into the cowpats and effectively kills off any other insect life.

"Like all British bats, Greater Horseshoes only eat insects," explains Anna David, of the Devon Bat Project. "When the young bats, called pups, are first flying, the food type they really need is dung beetles. If they can't find them, that's really problematic because they need to fatten up in time for their first winter.

"The link with organic farming and dung beetles is quite important because any kind of wormer product is essentially an insecticide. One particular class of wormer, known as ivermectins, is probably the worst because it doesn't get metabolised by the animal," she says. "So about 95 per cent of this really powerful insecticide, designed to kill worms and certain types of insects, is ending up in a cowpat. When dung beetles eat it and lay their eggs in it, a large proportion of them won't survive. And if that happens again and again, that local population will die out."

Despite these challenges, in one corner of the UK there is a thriving colony of both bats and dung beetles thanks to a cluster of organic farms where chemical wormer is tightly regulated, and a landscape that doesn't lend itself to intensive farming.

> "Devon is a stronghold for these bats - it's down to how farmers manage their land.

In fact, south Devon is home to the largest colony of Greater Horseshoe bats in the whole of Europe, with 3,000 of them – a quarter of the UK population – roosting close to the small town of Buckfastleigh. "Devon is a stronghold for Greater Horseshoe bats. It's down to how farmers and landowners in this area manage their land, which is key to the bats' habitat," says David.

Down the road is organic veg box company Riverford's Wash Farm, and in the local area are many organic farms belonging to the South Devon Organic Producers, a cooperative supplying Riverford's veg boxes.

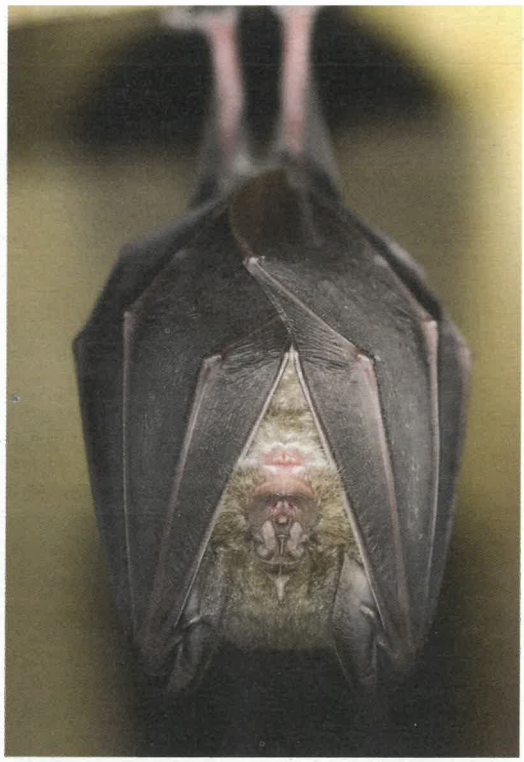
"We're quite lucky around Buckfastleigh in that there are quite a few organic farms," adds David, who explains that bats are useful as an indicator of landscape health.

"If you've got a big population of Greater Horseshoe bats, then it is quite a good proxy for knowing that your environment is relatively good. Because they're quite big bats, and they eat a lot of these insects that are also vulnerable," she says.

Then there's their role as a handy pest control. "The most common three bat species eat midges and they can eat thousands of them every night. So you can imagine in terms of pest control, that's really beneficial," says David.

Adult bats also eat cockchafers, or Maybugs, another previously common insect now in decline due to agriculture, says David. "They are larvae for quite a few years underground, so if you're putting a lot of fertiliser and pesticides on the ground then there is evidence to suggest that's going to impact on the lifecycle of that larvae," explains David. "Permanent pasture and having those undisturbed areas of grassland is really key. They also really need trees because they eat tree leaves when they're adult."

The importance of hedges and the number of species that they can support is something Alison Samuel, a Devon-based organic farmer and vegetable grower for Riverford's veg boxes, knows first-hand. Surveys on her farm, which spans a relatively small 100 acres, have spotted "incredible" numbers of field voles, 60 bird species and 10 out of the 18 British bat species, including the



Pipistrelle, Greater Horseshoe and the rare Brown Long-eared.

"As organic farmers, we're restricted on what wormer we can use," says Samuel. "We use products that are registered for use on organic farms, and there are no ivermectins in there. We do faecal egg counts to monitor and we only use wormers if needed.

"We don't cut the hedges every year, we keep them tall and only cut once every three years. We've got small fields and then we've got hedges! We're only a small farm but we try and do what we can.

"We've always been into wildlife. We're just a typical Devon farm, but we wanted to encourage as much as we could," she adds. "That's why we wanted to convert to organic; it seems to be kinder to species."

Bat populations are under threat in the UK primarily because of their reliance on insects, which are facing catastrophic declines due to pesticides and intensive agriculture. Added to a changing climate forcing them to relocate, they also face new interactions with human and well-lit urban environments.

"What we do know for sure is insect populations are in decline and that's because of the use of pesticides and also because of the impact of light pollution," adds David.

The link between bats, beetles and dung may seem insignificant, but it is an example of how the tapestry of an ecosystem works together. As David puts it: "It's all these different layers that connect together and if you remove one it's okay, but eventually after a while you get to that point of collapse, and that's the worry about the greater picture of the planet and where we're getting to."

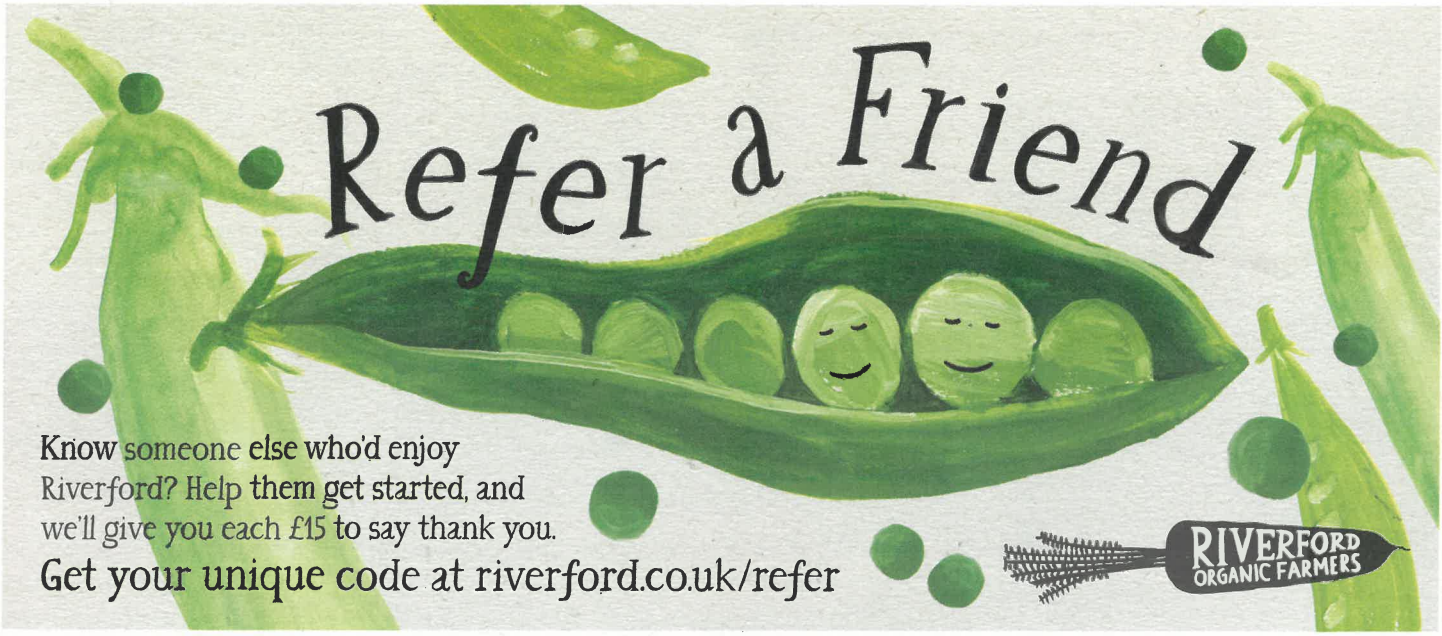
WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP BATS?

"Try to reduce lighting at night," says Anna David of the Devon Bat Project.

"So if you've got big security lights, increase the sensitivity on your lights so they don't get switched on by bats."

You can also choose moth-friendly plant species in your garden, says David, including things like honeysuckle or white flowers, which attract moths.

"If you're getting moths into your garden you're likely to attract some bats," she adds.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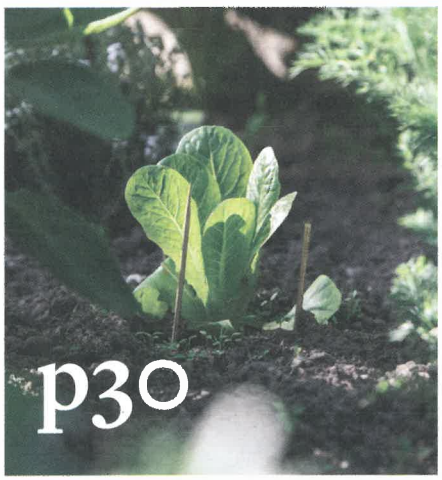
WICKED LEEKS
LIFESTYLE

p26 The power of seasonality

p28 What to eat in spring



p30 Companion planting

Research shows eating diverse plants supports a healthy gut.

Eating for gut health

Multiple plants offer multiple health benefits.

As research increases what we know about the link between diversity in diet and gut health, Emily Muddeman gave it a go herself, eating 30 plants a week and sharing her tips.

The concept of gut health has gained a lot of momentum over the last few years, but it's not just a wellness fad. A few years ago, most people hadn't heard of the term 'gut microbiome', but today gut health is a hot topic, and for good reason.

Having a healthy gut plays a huge part in our overall health, including our mental health, digestion, and immunity. Our gut microbiome (or gut flora) is made up of trillions of microorganisms, like bacteria and fungi. There are up to 1,000 species of bacteria in the human gut microbiome: each of them plays a different role in your body, and most are extremely important for your health. These microbes are now recognised as an extra organ within our body, and astonishingly, they weigh roughly the same as your brain (1-2kg).

So what's the key to a healthy gut and therefore good overall health? In short: food diversity, and more specifically, plant-based food diversity. Plants contain different types of prebiotics, which are the types of dietary fibre that feed the friendly bacteria in your gut. The guidance is to aim for 30 different plants a week. This may sound intimidating, but as someone who has been aiming for this for the last couple of months, I promise it's very achievable.

1 FOCUS ON VARIETY

Focus on a variety of wholegrains, beans and pulses as your main carbohydrate sources. Examples include brown rice, quinoa, oats, chickpeas, lentils, and different types of beans.

2 EAT THE RAINBOW

Aim to eat a wide variety of fruit, vegetables and herbs across the week, rather than repeating a few staples. If you are worried about buying too much to get through before it goes off, buy a mixture of fresh and frozen fruit and veg, i.e frozen mixed berries, mango, pineapple, peas, edamame (soya) beans.

3 PLANT BASED

Choose plant-based recipes, as they typically mean lots of plants in one dish. There are so many amazing cookbooks and resources out there. Some of my favourites include *Rebel Recipes*, *Bosh!* and *Deliciously Ella*.

4 TRACKING YOUR FOOD

Find a way of tracking your weekly plant-based food count. I started by making a list on my phone in the notes section, but then *Deliciously Ella* added a plant counter to her recipe app. It's 99p a month, so well worth it as you get access to a huge number of recipes, too. And if you make one of her recipes, you can click 'I've eaten this recipe' and it will automatically add all the ingredients to your tracker.

5 NUTS & SEEDS

Go wild for nuts and seeds. Top your porridge with nut butters; sprinkle toasted pine nuts over salads; add crunchy cashews to your curries; add a tablespoon of mixed seeds to your smoothies.

Give it a go!

It will benefit every organ in your body, and you'll reap the rewards with more energy, better digestion, a happier mind, glowing skin, increased immunity and more.

Feeling the rhythm

> Comforting carbs are followed by spring greenery and a vitamin boost as we emerge from our wintery cocoon.

Our connection with the rhythm of the seasons has gradually unravelled, but understanding and celebrating food seasonality can help anchor us in both time and place, writes Becky Blench.

There's a problem on our plates. Our connection with the rhythm of the year has gradually unravelled – eating strawberries when there is snow on the ground has become the norm. Disastrous environmentally, it has given us endless choice but taken away so much, especially in terms of our relationship with food.

A great alternative is to start to align ourselves a bit more with following the veg calendar, rediscovering a sense of joyful anticipation and enabling us to be more fully present. Seasonal eating helps our bodies adapt to the changing weather, imparting the energy of each quarter. Comforting carbs when we need to cosy up are followed by essential spring greenery to give us that vitamin boost as we emerge from our wintery cocoon.

A diverse diet is good for everything from the gut biome outward, stabilising our mood and supporting the immune system. Vibrant flavours from a rainbow of fruit and veg abound as we enter the 'Veg New Year' – the burst of new produce being harvested from May onward, coming after the leaner times of April's 'Hungry Gap'.

This year more than ever, the contrast is even more marked by us being released into the wild again after lockdown. Some will spring out ready to get stuck in to as much socialising as is safely possible, others need to feel their way back into hanging out with others.

Picnics are a great no-pressure way to catch up and connect us not just with each other but with the elements. Whether it's a quick sandwich on a sunny bench in your local park with a friend, a portable feast in the woods, or an elaborate boho encampment for the afternoon in your back garden – complete with pillows, lanterns, and whatever other luxuries spring to mind – food somehow always tastes nicer outdoors and is a delight to share.

Seasonal eating used to have a bit of an uninspiring, 'worthy' image but that has been replaced by a new creative ethos around UK-grown produce coupled with the desire to embrace a more climate-friendly diet. Leading from the top are influencers such as Melissa Hemsley (@melissa.hemsley) and Anna Jones (@we_are_food) who are all about inspiration and practical tips.

We live in the modern world, and going fully seasonal is tricky – journalist Clare Hargreaves' journey of eating (and drinking) UK produce only for 12 months is fascinating though. Coffee, citrus and

RECIPE

Whole grilled broad beans with chilli and lemon

Prep time: 10 min, cooking time: 10 min

Cooking fresh whole broad bean pods over coals creates a smoky, salty, and very moreish side dish with minimal prep and maximum flavour. A great way of cooking them without having to waste the pods, the outside is deliciously charred while the beans steam nicely inside their parcels.

Ingredients

- Handful whole broad beans
- 1 lemon
- 1 chilli
- olive oil
- sea salt

Method

Peel away the stringy part of each pod, by pinching the top or tail of the pod and pulling down each side of it. Toss the broad beans in olive oil and salt, and place on a really hot BBQ or griddle pan.

After about 2-3 minutes (giving them a turn halfway through), the outsides should have charred nicely and the pods should turn a vibrant green. Pile onto a plate and finish by sprinkling over chopped chilli, lots of lemon zest, a little lemon juice and sea salt.

Opposite: BBQ spring veg and toss in a salad. Above: Asparagus is in season.

spices are off the menu, but she finds amazing alternatives from all corners of the country. You can follow her journey at @larderloutUK on Instagram.

Adding elements of homegrown food to your plate is a simple way to stay in tune with nature. According to the Royal Horticultural Society, food growing in domestic settings increased substantially in 2020, with a return to staples such as potatoes, salad, onions and plants associated with herbal remedies.

Allotment membership has boomed, as have community growing groups. Even if you just have a windowsill, you can supplement your veg box with homegrown edible flowers or herbs – follow @dresslikeagardener for more home-growing tips.

Food anchors us in place and time; some of our most memorable moments are while eating – not just on the obvious feast days like Christmas or Easter, but simpler times like savouring the first asparagus, tasting buttery new potatoes in spring, or the sweetest summer berries freshly picked. What's not to love?

Top 3 recipes for picnics & garden get-togethers

Enjoy the best of spring's seasonal stars while reconnecting with friends and family over long lunches in the garden or local park.

Asparagus and blue cheese tart

This vegetarian tart pairs asparagus with many of its foodie friends; blue cheese, eggs, nuts, fennel and citrus.

Warm potato, radish and bean salad

When new potatoes and radishes are in full swing, how better to celebrate than with this superlative salad? The herbs and capers create a salsa verde – a perfect match for the beans and eggs.

Spinach, olive and feta tart

Another flexible recipe and a great crowd-pleaser. Vary the fillings as much as you like – use chard leaves or spring/summer greens, instead of spinach.

For the full recipes, go to riverford.co.uk/recipes

SPRINGING into life

Head chef of The Riverford Field Kitchen, Lewis Glanvill, on why he loves spring, the arrival of new ingredients, and a nostalgic dish to welcome in the season.

Top: Wild garlic foraging is a spring staple. Inset: Infuse gorse into drinks.

With spring in full swing, it is time to shed any remaining signs of winter and the year gone by, to usher in a fresh new look.

Here at The Riverford Field Kitchen, the kitchen team have had the time to work in the gardens, preparing beds, cleaning polytunnels and painting sheds ready for the year as we look forward to finally reopening our doors.

One of the reasons I love spring is it's always been about fresh beginnings and new life, which feels entirely relevant this year and synonymous with life around us. There is a certain undeniable and exciting energy that comes with spring, and more so now we are emerging from an enforced hibernation, looking forward to the long and hopefully warmer days.

I think the glorious return of the vibrant produce on the farm is a symbol of hope and creativity. And meanwhile, the ease of lockdown and reopening of the restaurant on the farm could not come at a better time, because it brings a bounty of new ingredients into our kitchen.

As the days get brighter, so does the food from the fields; the earthy root vegetables of winter are replaced by brighter and more verdant palettes of colours and flavours.

Another of my favourite things about this time of year working in the Field Kitchen are the trees around the restaurant in full blossom, and each year I forget how much I love the sun flooding the kitchen workspace from the floor-to-ceiling windows. The ingredients I most look forward to are the first baby artichokes, new potatoes, rhubarb, asparagus, peas,

> To celebrate spring, there is a dish I make every year, albeit with slight adaptations.

broad beans, elderflower and spring nettles.

To celebrate spring, there is a dish I make every year, albeit with slight adaptations. Every time I taste it there is a nostalgia for the first time I made it; a spring lunch after going out and picking the radishes, lovage and Jersey Royals at Coombeshead Farm in Cornwall. Each year I will add more – nettles, wild garlic, peas, broad beans – as a celebration of the new season's produce.

This year, I've been looking for ways to use the whole pea, pod and all, so there is no waste. Peas may seem small but they are so sweet and tender. If it feels like you're not getting a lot for your time spent podding, try juicing the pods and get double the yield.

RECIPE

Jersey Royals, new season radishes, pea pod and lovage broth

Ingredients

- 5 Jersey Royal or new potatoes
- 6 radishes
- 200g peas
- 2 handfuls lovage
- 500ml chicken/ veg stock
- 50g butter
- 1 clove garlic

Method (serves 2)

Put the Jersey Royals in a pan and boil in seasoned water until soft. Strain and leave to cool then cut into bitesize chunks. Cut the radishes to the same size.

Pod all the peas. Leave the peas in a bowl to one side. If you're feeling foodie, juice the pods in a juicer, or blanch for 1 minute, strain, blend and sieve.

For the broth, bring a pan of seasoned water to the boil, drop the lovage leaves in for 1 minute, then strain and place in very cold water to stop the cooking.

Squeeze the lovage to remove all the water. Bring the stock to the boil and pour into a blender with the lovage and pod juice until vibrant, green and smooth.

Put the butter, 100ml of water and 1 garlic clove into a pan. Add the radishes and peas, and cook for 2 minutes until the radishes soften. Add the potatoes and warm through.

Spoon the potatoes, radishes and peas into bowls and pour over the lovage and pea broth.

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Good neighbours

THE BENEFITS OF COMPANION PLANTING

Give your plants the right neighbours and you'll be rewarded with free pest control and better yields.

SARAH BROWN
Gardening columnist

Are plants good neighbours? How garden plants relate to each other is a fascinating subject, and it gives rise to a well-known practice called 'companion planting'. Putting garlic by your roses, for instance, is claimed by some to make the rose blossom smell sweeter.

Much of this neighbourliness is, sadly, unproven. But here are some tips for plants which grow in harmony. And as we all know, harmony leads to healthy, and healthy leads to blooming marvellous – whether in life or in the veg plot.

It's all about creating plant communities that have mutual benefits to each other.

Let's look at the three general principles of companion planting.

1 Putting different varieties next to each other means you are creating a diverse ecosystem. This not only helps below ground, making sure you don't plant too many nutrient-hungry crops in a small area, but also above ground, with a wide range of flowers and growth to support insects and other wildlife all through the year.

Top tip: Sow deep-rooting carrots and shallow-rooting onions side-by-side. That way the soil nutrients are shared, without too much competition.

2 Mixing veg and flowers helps with pollination. If you cleverly juxtapose blossoms alongside your fruiting vegetables you'll bring in the bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects.

Top tip: Try a border of oregano beside your courgettes. The busy bees will make a beeline to the flowers of both, ensuring the pollen between the courgette plants gets transferred and fruits formed. You've also got the makings of a fab pizza topping!

3 Growing some plants together can control pests and diseases. We know that fennel flowers, and other umbellifera such as cow parsley, attract hoverflies, which will munch through the aphids.

Top tip: A brightly-coloured nasturtium planted among beans will help mop up those annoying black fly. Horticulturalists call it a sacrificial crop. I like to think it's the plants' way of taking a hit for their neighbour.

Top: Plant flowers to attract beneficial insects. Left: Mix up your beds.

You can also foil pests with some crafty sowing. Farmers have found that putting a yellow trefoil (*Medicago lupulina*) in the same module as a calabrese seed can significantly reduce the damage caused by the cabbage root fly, as the fly is confused by the close proximity of the trefoil. And in my own little greenhouse, I regularly sow a bunch of marigolds (*Tagetes minuta*) to reduce the whitefly on my precious tomatoes. It doesn't actually stop the fly, but the bright orange marigold petals seduce them away from the tomato plants.

Plants can help each other in simpler ways too. A row of tall sweetcorn or runner beans will provide shelter and windbreak for more delicate plants. The jolly poached egg plant (*Limnanthes*) is low growing, which makes it ideal for smothering weeds under shrubs, roses and fruits.

To sum up, diversity is a good thing – whether among humans or within the plant kingdom. And a little neighbourliness takes it a whole step better.

The Grow Your Own Wicked Leeks series is written by Garden Organic, the national charity for organic growing. Each month we bring you timely advice on what to do in your organic patch, whether you're an experienced grower or just starting out. Share your own tips and gardening photos on social media under #GYOWickedLeeks.

One last thing...

Wicked Chats

with Rukmini Iyer

Rukmini Iyer is the bestselling author of *The Roasting Tin* and of the new *Green Barbecue* (out now). @missminifer.

What is your first food memory?
Fried chicken! We were moving house when I was very young and all the furniture had gone ahead of us, so we sat in the living room and had fried chicken for lunch on a picnic blanket. It felt very exciting, like camping.

Where are you happiest?
In a patch of sunlight, like a cat. I follow the light around my house or my boyfriend's with my laptop and notebooks, and the collie follows me – although she's started stealing the best patches of sunlight.

What's your most treasured possession?
Pepper, the border collie: she's just turned two years' old and is such a character – demanding, capricious, clever, and endearing. If you kiss the top of her head – which I often do – she smells like a delicious ginger biscuit. Her favourite dish is pot-roast chicken and rice with ginger and turmeric, so this may have something to do with it.

What trait do you most dislike in others?
Artificiality and close-mindedness. I like people who are genuinely excited about things and willing to entertain new ideas.

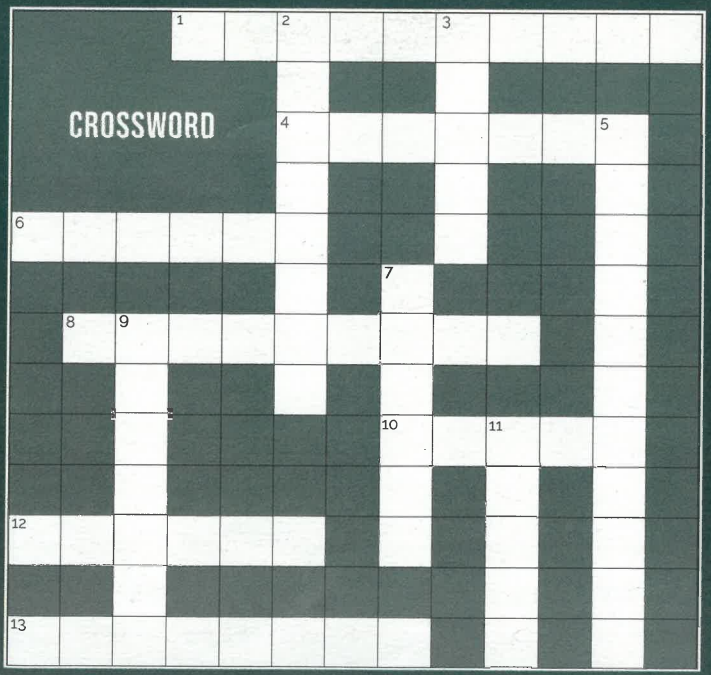
Who do you most admire and why?
My younger sister Padmini; she's got a razor-sharp mind, an ability to articulate her ideas with conviction, and really lives by her principles. She's also the kindest person I know and makes me laugh more than anyone else. She is the person I would like to be if I wasn't quite so frivolous.

What's your pet hate?
Bad lighting.

What's been your worst job?
Trainee solicitor.

Tell us a secret most people won't know about you.
Only my friends and family know this – I'm not a fan of avocados!

CROSSWORD



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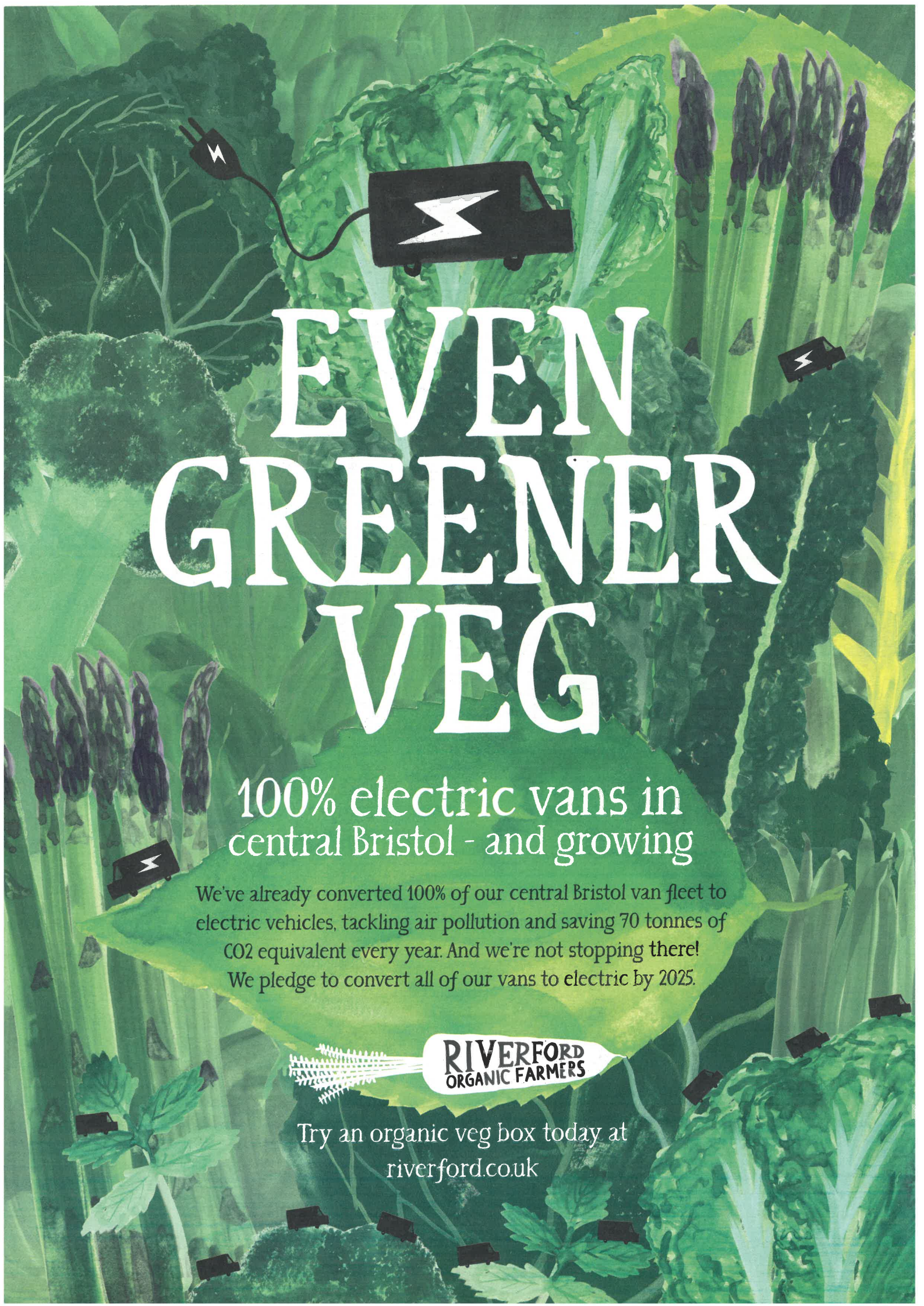
Seasonal greens, not flying machines

A kilo of carrots for 40p?
That'll do for roast dinner, you think.
Berries in March, flown in from Peru?
Will look nice in your Friday night drink.
Asparagus season won't start until May,
But that won't change your dinner time plans,
When you can buy spears any time, all year,
Grown and picked in some far away land.

But why do you think your veg is so cheap?
Doesn't the farmer deserve decent pay?
And why are they all so perfect and neat,
When we know they don't really grow in that way?
Why are you buying fruit and veg
That's come thousands and thousands of miles?
Why get them by plane, when there's a farm down the lane,
Right here, in our own British Isles?

- Anonymous. Winner of the Riverford Poetry Day Competition 2021.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We've already converted 100% of our central Bristol van fleet to electric vehicles, tackling air pollution and saving 70 tonnes of CO2 equivalent every year. And we're not stopping there! We pledge to convert all of our vans to electric by 2025.
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